



On·Spec

more than just science fiction

SUMMER 1998

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ON SPEC
more than just science fiction

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<i>Art Director:</i>	Jane Starr
<i>Production Editor:</i>	Jena Snyder
<i>Executive Assistant:</i>	Katerina Carastathis
<i>Publisher's Assistant:</i>	Andrea Merriman
<i>Cover Artist this issue:</i>	Jeff de Boer
<i>Webmaster:</i>	Rick LeBlanc, The Infrastructure Network
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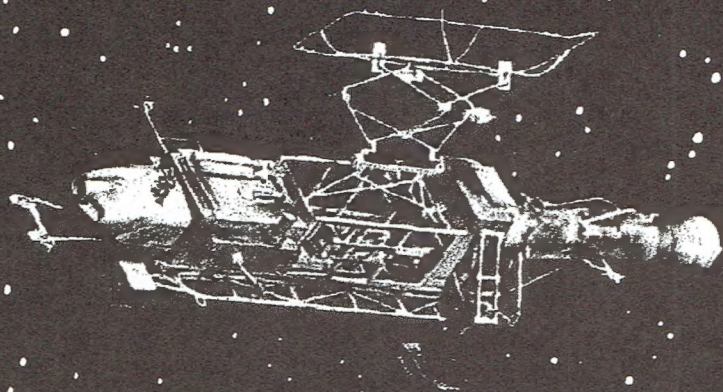
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FOR INFORMATION, CALL: (403) 279-4052

OR WRITE: #4, 203 LYNNVIEW ROAD S.E. CALGARY, AB T2C 2C6

EMAIL: TOBLANBR@CADVISION.COM OR GARYF@NUCLEUS.COM

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On this issue...

Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize Winners

Jena Snyder

We've been so tied up in reorganizing and revamping On Spec, we neglected to do something important last year—announce the winner of our annual Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize. The winner for 1997 was ANDREW GRAY for his story "Leaving Paris," featured in the Fall 1996 issue.

This year, our winner is FIONA HEATH, for her "Casserole Diplomacy," which led off our special "Canadian Geographic" theme issue last year (Spring 1997). Congratulations to both Fiona and Andrew!

•

*Come, gentle night; come, loving, black-browed night;
Give me my Romeo; and, when he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.*

"Take him and cut him out in little stars..." What incredible power there is in those lines, bringing tears to my eyes every time I read them, every time I hear them! A family friend had them read at her memorial service years ago: I think of her every time I pass the Shakespeare section of the library, every time I hear someone massacre the "wherefore art thou, Romeo?" soliloquy, every time I read *Romeo and Juliet*.

Words are a writer's epitaph, and more solid than any granite headstone. I hope, when I die, I'll have a book or two on a library shelf, shining down like those "little stars."

Lydia Langstaff, a former *On Spec* contributor ("Bogey," Spring 94), will never get the chance to see her first novel, an historical fantasy set in twelfth century

Scotland, in print. A young writer with a promising future just beginning to open up before her, Lydia died suddenly on July 10, 1994, after suffering a heart attack. Born with serious heart problems and never expected to live for more than six months, Lydia was, in the words of Eileen Kernaghan: "...a remarkable young woman, with astonishing courage and strength of will" who "worked harder at her writing—under more difficult circumstances—than anyone I've ever known." A member of the Burnaby Writers' Society and the Helix Writing Workshop, Lydia had seen her work appear in publications such as *Testament of Lael* and *The Poetic Knight*, and she was a regular contributor to the *Celtic Connection* newspaper. When she died, Lydia was only 28.

Thinking of Lydia, of the future she had, the books and poems and stories left unwritten, I wondered if *On Spec* could do something more, if not for Lydia, at least for other promising writers like her. I'm sure that in every issue of *On Spec*, we publish at least one writer's first sale; many of these writers are, like Lydia, under 30. I thought: Why not offer a prize to the best new talent we see each year, and name the

prize after Lydia, in her memory?

And so, starting in 1995, with the blessings of Lydia's husband Jeff, we awarded the first "Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize." At the end of each year, the *On Spec* editors and one outside judge will choose, in their opinion, the best story or poem published in *On Spec* by a young and upcoming author, and award a prize of \$100. To qualify, the author must be 30 years of age or younger at the time of publication of his or her work in *On Spec*; and must have no novels published, and must not have sold more than three short stories to semi-pro or pro magazines. In this way, we can give a new author an extra boost, maybe even that little nudge that helps convince them: *I can do this*.

Shine on, Lydia. You're an inspiration to us all.

The winner of the first Lydia Langstaff Memorial Prize (1995) was WILLIAM SOUTHEY, for his short story "Gone to Earth and Ashes" in the Winter 1994 issue of *On Spec*.

SANDRA KASTURI was the winner for 1996, for her poetry published in the Summer, Fall, and Winter issues of *On Spec*. ♣

ABOUT OUR COVER ARTIST:

JEFF de BOER is a Calgary artist. He creates exquisitely detailed sculptures in metal, stone, acrylic, wood, and "mixed media." His work ranges from fully functional suits of armor for mice and cats and corporate executives, to space vehicles and futuristic weaponry. The intricacy and beauty of his work awes the viewer, but it is its whimsical humor that makes it memorable. Once seen, it is never forgotten. The steel, brass, acrylic, and mixed media sculpture featured on our cover, "Test Driving Next Year's Model," was photographed by Ken Woo.



Families

David Hull

illustrated by James Beveridge

Deborah was sitting at the kitchen table when the doorbell rang. She barely heard it. Across the table, past the untouched newspaper and her cold cup of coffee, the TV screen was showing a close-up of muddy earth, wet brown leaves, stray clumps of twitchgrass and thistle. The camera had not moved for two minutes. Nor had Deborah. She was transfixed, by the image itself and by the camera's relentless, inexhaustible probity. Another minute, she began to think, even a few more seconds, and the ground would flicker and fade, surrendering its magical transcendent core to her eye. Once she'd had the power to see how the world glowed through its deceptive shell of solidity; she lost that power long ago. Her memories of it could no more illuminate her soul than memories of a meal could nourish her. Her growing excitement as she stared at the TV image, the wise majesty of its stillness, came from the tantalizing promise of renewal of that deeper-seeing eye.

But the doorbell kept ringing, and it finally broke her trance and pulled her back from the brink of revelation. With an enormous effort, she tore her gaze from the screen; it felt as though she were ripping out her eyes. As soon as she left the kitchen, however, she shuddered, briefly angry at herself for the time she spent in front of the TV, aging under the cool blue wash of its rays. The door bell rang yet

again, and she quickened her pace, eager now for human contact.

She made a half-hearted attempt to tidy herself, then gave up: in her baggy-kneed track suit it was impossible not to look like a slob. But at least she could be a friendly slob. She pressed her palm against the ID panel, releasing the bolt locks with a ballistic retort. She pulled the door open, and smiled. Her smile shut right back down with an abruptness that rivaled the snapping locks when she saw the custodian.

"Oh," she moaned, "it's you."

The custodian stood helplessly on the step, four red lights flashing madly on its panel, its motor grinding and wheezing. The dome of its sensory mounting whirled up slightly as it scanned Deborah's face. She sighed and leaned over to see what was wrong. "Oil! Oil! Oil!" one of the lights blinked over and over; another demanded electricity. A third read simply "Failure." Deborah was about to press it for a readout, when she noticed the small heaps of brown mulch deposited in a trail on the front walk. She leaned over further. The custodian's back flap was hanging open, smears of humus staining the brushed aluminum shell. "Oh, honestly," she said with exasperation. She untucked a Kleenex from her sleeve, then suddenly caught herself. "What am I doing?" she muttered. Anger boiled up again. She cuffed the side of the custodian with the heel of her hand, shutting the machine down.

Yet as soon as she returned to the kitchen, her anger melted away, neutralized by the soothing, mysterious stillness of the TV image. It was amazing—in fact it was almost frightening now. How long could he stare at a

patch of earth? Then, in the middle of the screen, a tiny blur of pink appeared; Deborah squinted and moved closer. A worm was creeping from its tunnel. Fascinated, she watched it contract and stretch as it squeezed from the earth, jabbing into the air as though shaking the globe itself from its shoulders. Then, maddeningly, the camera panned slowly away, to the left—and a six-year-old girl came into view. It was Valerie Atkins. She was sitting cross-legged on the ground, picking up pebbles, mouthing a few words to each, stroking them gently with a fingertip, and then setting them back down in little clusters. Families. Deborah smiled. The camera panned ominously back to the right, where the worm had exposed its full pink length to the air. Deborah groaned, anticipating what would happen next. A small hand came into view from the bottom of the picture and picked up the worm. "Yech," said Deborah.

All at once there was chaos on the screen. The camera wheeled around and started racing towards little Valerie, bouncing and jerking frenetically. She turned to face it, and her mouth fell open in a silent scream. She leapt to her feet and started to run, through mud puddles, over small weedy hills, towards the row of bungalows far in the distance, but the camera kept gaining on her. Suddenly Valerie stopped, and pivoted. The fear vanished from her face; she set her jaw, narrowed her eyes, raised her hands like claws, and when the camera was almost upon her, she flung herself at it, and the picture lurched and stuttered. In a violent crescendo of broken images that left Deborah feeling dizzy

and exhilarated, the ground flew up and the picture spun out of control, with Valerie's enraged face flying across a flickering background of earth and sky as she rolled down a hill.

No sooner had the picture come to rest than the videophone chimed, as Deborah had known it would. She sighed and answered, muting the video as always.

"Hello... Oh, hello, Mrs. Atkins, and how are you? ... Yes, I've been watching ... mm-hmm ... yes, it was awful of him to chase her with that worm ... mm-hmm... No, don't worry, I'll tell him... Goodbye, Mrs. Atkins." She clicked off, and sighed again.

When she returned to the TV, it showed a close-up of Valerie, now beaming with delight and yapping merrily away. Some parents had such a dim understanding of child's play, Deborah reflected, its breathtaking leaps from tenderness to war and back. She watched for another half hour, then reluctantly got up to search for some housework. She settled on ironing, one of the shrinking number of tasks that still required her physical input. When she was finished, she glanced at the clock. 11:30. She started lunch. Within seconds the TV image broke apart into more jittery sprinting. Deborah smiled at the precision of his inner clock. She switched on the tracking monitor. A crude graphic of a blockish, sexless figure was running towards the house, an escapee from a cheap video game; Deborah glanced at the TV screen beside the monitor, and saw the house itself come into view.

A familiar unease crept over her—the image always reminded her of the

war coverage of her childhood, footage of targets as seen from the tips of the missiles speeding towards them. The screen would go blank at what should have been the climactic moment, an anxiety-inducing *interruptus*. Annihilation—into nothing. For several months when she was ten, she had nightmares—every time she opened a door, the dreamscape vanished, and she was left hanging in the white void which was coterminous with destruction. She moved away from the screen and looked out the window, and saw her son racing up the front walk. Just before pressing his hand to the ID plate, he stopped, and kicked the dormant custodian. Deborah laughed, but at the same time she wondered if this was a bizarre manifestation of sibling rivalry. Or then again—she understood now the place a punch had in establishing friendships amongst boys... The thought was too depressing, and anyway it was drowned out when Jonah burst through the door, covered in mud, shouting how hungry he was.

The lens was a circle of black glass the size of a pinhead. It was anchored in the bone of Jonah's forehead, between and slightly above his eyebrows. An elastic strand of optical fiber ran beneath his skin, from the lens to the transmission unit, planted in the bone behind his right ear. Sometimes, when she was washing her son's face, Deborah found herself running her finger along the cable, tracing its path over his temple, around his ear, to the hard lump of microelectronics in the base of his skull, and her hand would recoil, momentarily baffled by this inexplicable phrenology.

Her husband, Richard, had always lived on the avant garde of consumerism, two technologies ahead of the herd. Sometimes it seemed that he'd wanted a child only because fatherhood would initiate him into vast new genres of mechanics. The basement was strewn with relics of his obsession: interactive cribs, SIDS warning systems; a motorized intelligent titanium stroller built to survive a 200 foot fall; gadgets from hardware stores—confirming that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of fathers—a strap-on moisture alarm in case baby forgot to cry; a sleek carbonized collaring mechanism, from which a limp rod ran up the back of baby's neck, programmed to snap taut if baby's head fell backwards for more than five seconds, which was how long Deborah tolerate that device. It wasn't that the Moores were rich; they simply spent what would have been their vacations in department stores, customizing their child, furnishing the Naked Astronaut with his Life Support and Mission Control. Technology was Richard's substitute for the father whom he had experienced as remote, emotionless yet frightening; only now, Richard was the one in control. So Deborah had told him, during an argument. But she always lost those fights. Whenever he set his sights on a new device, he wore down Deborah's objections with a mixture of pleading, lecturing, and guilt-tripping, until she finally gave in. However, when he rushed home one day and told her, breathlessly, tripping over his words, that he wanted to have their son's scalp cut open so that implants could be drilled into his skull, Deborah reached

her limit. Jonah's skin was a border that technology would not perforate. She refused to sign the consent forms.

Richard surprised her by dropping the issue; later, she realized that he'd been in no great rush because the implants would be useless until their neighborhood was patched into the transmission network. He abandoned his usual tactics and subscribed to a newspaper clipping service.

Every day, he came home from work and deposited another pile of articles culled from papers across the continent. Despite herself, Deborah read them: she read of children snatched from parks, children lured from schoolyards, lifted from supermarkets, ripped from their own backyards. She read of the mothers, uniformly distraught and broken, their wounds as raw as they would have been had parts been torn from their bodies. She followed the stories of dozens, hundreds, of abducted children, followed them into the almost invariable void they withered into, with searches called off, police closing their files, and only the solitary parents left with their vigil at the edge of a huge and mutual emptiness, that emptiness being the world itself, from which their children had vanished. She would never forgive her husband for this brutal war against her spirit, as his clippings battered her into a hopeless submission and infected her with his own paranoia.

Then the inevitable counter-current of stories began, and Deborah found herself vulnerable to their promise of security. These told of abductions thwarted by parents alert at their monitors; TV newscasts ran

footage of desperate men leaning down to entice their victims, the men's faces swollen by the wide-angle lenses puncturing the children's skin—faces which seemed ready to burst with the pressures they contained, as though the innocent third eye revealed the hidden deformity of their desires; and then exciting, gratifying scenes of police swooping down on the predators. But there were also instances of police tracking children when it was too late, the stationary radar signals leading them to ditches and shallow graves. Nonetheless, millions of the systems were installed. Deborah shrank into paralyzed, helpless terror, until finally she surrendered to Richard's wishes—if only so that the stream of unspeakable news might cease.

But its value as a security measure was only one selling point. Children were marked off as members of a privileged caste by the glass specks on their foreheads. Their privilege consisted of the fact that they would have digitized records of their entire childhoods. Jonah was part of the first human generation whose memories would never be lost.

Deborah was relieved when he raced back outside to play after his lunch; it was so boring when he napped or watched TV. She used to deactivate the camera whenever he was in front of the television, until Richard gently lectured her on the importance of cultural artifacts and the unwisdom of depriving Jonah of a record of the shows of his childhood. "Don't you wish you could watch the old *Pee Wees* you saw when you were little?" he asked. "What if he wants to

be a cultural theorist when he grows up? He'd never forgive you."

Jonah turned a corner and disappeared towards the ragged parkland at the edge of the subdivision. Deborah wanted to go straight to the monitor, but the idle custodian was still on the steps. She went downstairs, returning with oil and the reserve battery pack, which she snapped into place after removing the drained one. She knelt down to find out why the back flap wouldn't close. There was no apparent malfunction; it was nothing a swift kick couldn't fix. She sent it back on to the lawn to finish mulching leaves.

All afternoon she watched the screen in the kitchen, engrossed by the insights it gave her into her son. She had learned so much about him from her vantage point in his brow. Once, she watched a faraway group of children play baseball. She was wondering why Jonah didn't move closer, until with a sharp pang she realized that he was hovering at the edge of the outfield because he was too shy to ask if he could join in. Another time she watched in horror as a game degenerated into a fight, his opponent's fists and face enormous, the picture almost incomprehensible—she barely managed to stop herself from hitting the emergency police feed, demanding that they send two cruisers in to break up the schoolyard ruckus. When Jonah returned home, she cautiously asked him about his scratches and bruises. He told her he'd fallen. Was it fair to deprive a boy of his right to lie and his ability to protect his burgeoning independence from the mother who pried so ceaselessly through the tiny lens in his forehead? So far she had never

challenged his lies—but soon enough the full implications of the implant would dawn on him. He would cover the lens, severing Deborah's feed. She didn't want to hasten that day. But from what she could decipher of Jonah's relationship with little Valerie, the children were on track for a game of doctor. Would their discoveries precipitate a new awareness? In their nakedness, would they re-enact the advent of shame, and feel a sudden urge to cover, not themselves, but the cameras in their brows? Deborah cringed at the thought of Mrs. Atkins glaring at her son. But if Jonah didn't break the picture, would Deborah herself have the discipline to turn it off?

But today Jonah was content to play on the swings and slides. Deborah fell into the sweet rhythm of his pumping, climbing high into the blue sky, backwards in a dizzying rush. It was moments such as these, more than even the insights into her son's life, which held her so rapt to the monitor. The camera seemed to promise a return to child-like wonder. The simplest objects and activities could hold her son's attention for hours—he was open to the uncluttered magic of existence, his own and the world's—and Deborah, baffled by his fascinations, found herself yearning for that freshness of vision.

The phone rang. Once again the spell was broken. She stood up and, for a second, she was off-balance, listing to the side, as though she had just jumped out of the swing she'd been riding vicariously. She muted the video connection and answered.

It was Richard. Deborah played her part in the rote conversation, bringing

him up to date on Jonah's adventures, listening to Richard's accounts of his own.

"By the way, I told my mother you think I should get a vasectomy," he said snippishly. She bristled, not just at what he said but also at his voice, which had changed suddenly to a bitchy, sniping tone. His mother's tone. Couldn't he hear it? "She says why don't *you* go and get mutilated if you think it's such a good idea." Deborah gritted her teeth and stayed silent, refusing to be drawn into his little psychodrama. He was vicious but stupid, like one of those dinosaurs that only sees its prey when it moves. "And how come you're always blanking the video?" She heard the stirrings of hysteria in his voice, but said nothing. "You're not entertaining a gentleman visitor in there are you?"

Asshole, she mouthed. She wanted to scream at him. The only visitor she ever saw was the damn idiot custodian. She turned on the video feed and snarled into it, revealing herself in all her slovenly glory to her startled husband.

"There. Satisfied, Richard? Do I look like someone by whom a gentleman visitor might be entertained? Do I?"

Richard was wincing and looking past the deskphone in his office, embarrassed as ever by the prospect of a public scene. "No, Deb," he said soothingly, "no, I mean it, you don't." Deborah fought back a sob of laughter—he thought he was complimenting her! "I was just kidding," he finished in a somber voice. "I'll see you after work, Deborah." He cut the line.

Deborah went into the kitchen. She made herself a cup of coffee and a slice of toast. As she buttered the toast, she

found herself relaxing—the scraping of the knife, the smell of melting butter, the sheer tactile delight involved in actually doing something: it was all surprisingly pleasant. She made another piece, and then a third, just to give her hands the satisfaction of working, her ears, the pleasure of listening to their labor. She varied the rhythm, scraping the knife across the toast so that it sounded like a spade cutting into gravelly soil. As if sensing her momentary contentedness and programmed to disrupt, the Autovac appeared in the doorway and began creeping towards her. “Ugh,” said Deborah with revulsion when its distended pink sac came into view. The pendulous bag bulged out and up from the small body unit, like an insect’s grossly enlarged abdomen. It stopped a few feet away and started bleating for her to empty its bag. “Shut up, you ugly bottomfeeder,” she hissed, and then suddenly she laughed again, recalling the story her friend Janice had told her. Janice came home one day to find her vac trailing the cat through the house, the cat glancing back with disgust at its determined pursuer. Deborah’s smile faded as she tried to remember when she had last spoken with Janice. Perhaps her husband had replaced her with a Mommybot. No, if there was such a thing, she would already know.

She had thought that having a child would be like launching a lifeboat, into which she would set all of herself that was good, salvaging those qualities as she floundered and sank. A newborn’s body is no longer connected to its mother, but its being and hers are drawn together by invisible bonds;

birth, labor, were partial processes, metaphors almost, foreshadowing the separation, less abrupt but nearly as painful, which would occur as the child grew into its own identity. In some ways Deborah had found the second separation the more difficult, because it seemed to be something she could prevent, but she knew better than to cling to her young child. Not while she was sinking. The urge to do so was a form of maternal greed which would only scar them both. She had to let go, and she kept on letting go, biting down to stifle the pain she felt. But technology always conspired to regenerate the bond between them.

The doorbell rang. Deborah walked over to open it. “Now what?” she sighed as the custodian’s camera whirled up and processed her face against its recognition matrix, revising its imprint of her once it had established her identity. After all, it reasoned, she had aged since their last encounter. Deborah looked past it, at the modest houses of the subdivision, and let her glance rise and settle on the radar spike, a matte-black obelisk forty feet high. She could see two more of the spikes in the distance, part of the meticulous grid that covered the city. They dominated the low suburbs the way church steeples had once marked out the countryside, their relentlessly regular placement appropriate to the faith they proclaimed, in the power of technology to overcome the darkness in men’s souls.

The custodian clicked to remind her of its presence. A yellow message light was flashing. Deborah bent down and pressed it.

“Hey, baby. Looking good!” said the

readout.

Deborah's jaw dropped open. Then her eyes went narrow and cold. She stared down at the machine with sudden hatred.

"Bastard," she spat, whacking it with a solid right to shut it down. She slammed the door and stormed inside.

The husband who couldn't be bothered to kiss her goodnight had found the time to program his idiot machine, canning his endearments in its silicon. She was one more thing for the custodian to maintain. Rage surged up from her chest. The autovac was creeping across the carpet nearby. She kicked it as hard as she could. It flew across the room and smashed into the wall, but it landed on its feet and, after a momentary pause while it found its bearings, it whirled to life. It started creeping right back to Deborah, bleating for her attention, faithful in her ability to soothe it.

"Come here, you asshole," she hissed. She was horrified by the demonic intensity she heard in herself, yet thrilled too, by her own anger. Her whole body was tense with adrenaline, and she got ready to pounce on the machine, seize it and dash it to pieces.

Then she looked up at the television, and saw that Jonah was running.

She switched on the tracking screen—he wasn't running towards the house. The TV showed jittery parkland, then wheeled back across a blur of trees to show a quick glimpse of a man's legs, closing in. Jonah seemed to double his speed as he veered off towards the woods. He looked back again and now the man was almost upon him. "Oh my God," Deborah screamed. Then suddenly the camera

lurched to a halt and arced high into the sky, spun to the side and upside-down, before twisting upright to show an oblique close-up of the man's body, cut off at the neck, and Deborah was almost ill. She groped for the police feed, and was just about to hit it, when the camera—when Jonah—looked up, straight into the face of his father.

Deborah moaned and sank back with a massive sense of relief, which quickly gave way, however, to numbness. Richard's smiling, swollen face filled the screen, and then blotted out the picture entirely as he leaned towards the camera. A head-butt? A kiss? He stepped back and started making funny faces. Deborah was vaguely disgusted, but something about his eyes held her. She leaned closer to the screen.

He was staring straight into the camera. He was looking right through his son, into the tiny lens in Jonah's forehead, pulling faces to amuse his wife at home. Or maybe it wasn't even for her amusement, but his own; maybe he was looking forward to watching himself on the recordings of his son's childhood, proud of his status as the star of that long-running hit only puberty could cancel. Deborah observed his antics for a few seconds, but when he mouthed "Hi, Mom," she turned off the camera.

Later, while Richard was jump-cutting through the highlights of Jonah's day, Deborah sat in the kitchen. Waiting. Sure enough, it came. She heard him bark out, angry and surprised. Then he was snapping at her from the doorway. "Why did you stop recording? Are you crazy? You'll mess up his memories of me."

“I remember when they used to say you were crazy if you thought there was an implant in your head. Now you’re saying I’m crazy if I want one taken out of my son’s?”

The doctor pressed his lips together. He gave the impression of being compassionate, but he said nothing to contradict Deborah’s statement. “Well—implants. That’s two different uses of the word. After all, nobody’s controlling Jonah. Just monitoring him. Hardly the same thing!”

She took a long detour downtown to the old hassle-free clinic, with its history of medical disobedience. She was nervous and didn’t know where to start, but the receptionist smiled and interrupted her. “I understand dear. We’ve had a lot of women here with the same problem.”

When she washed Jonah’s face that night she let her finger follow the cable buried in his skin, over his temple and around his ear.

Just a quick snip. To get Mommy and Daddy out of his head. 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: DAVID HULL lives in Toronto. This is his second appearance in *On Spec*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: JAMES BEVERIDGE dwells in suburban Edmonton actively seeking the truth within the conundrum that is creativity, through activities both manual and silicon-based. Considered by some to be the poster boy for the Aesthetically Dyslexic, he is currently expanding his website with unsolicited visions from R. Jordan’s *Wheel of Time* series. Visit his website for more insights into his mind: <http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>.

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Exchange

Allan Weiss

illustrated by Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk

Peter noticed the trouble with his ears almost as soon as he arrived on Foralla. When he went to bed that first night in the small cabin he shared with Edilet, and the din of daily life finally died down, he heard a vague hissing. He thought that someone in a neighboring cabin was running some water; but when he blocked his ears with the stroath-leaf pillow the hiss got louder, and he realized it was inside his ears.

"God..." he said aloud, his heart pounding with fear. What did it mean? He'd found the day as painful as it was fascinating; the Ipli talk was sometimes unbearably loud, and he'd winced a few times at the happier statements from Edilet and Talemr, the Councilor who greeted him at the port.

"Are you well?" Edilet clicked from his bed on the other side of the room.

"Yes," Peter answered, and the one-way translator biofused into his chest turned his word into the Iplian equivalent: a sort of creak formed by the bending of the appendages on the sides of an Ipli's skull. But it was a lie—so he committed a terrible Iplian sin within hours of arriving.

To his relief, the hissing was gone when he awoke the next morning, and he began his training with Edilet in a much more confident mood. He'd been studying the Iplian way of life for years, and had dreamed of coming to live here—not in the small Terran colony near the port, but in an Iplian village where he could really learn what these beings were all about, and be completely a part of their lives.

But the hissing returned that night. He hoped it was nothing more than an adjustment to the constant barrage of Iplian sound, but was afraid it was something more. The Ipli spoke almost without pause, at every imaginable level of pitch and volume; practically every part of the hairless, fleshy area on their fronts that constituted their "faces" contributed to the production of communicative sounds.

Then came the horrible day a few weeks later, when he was busily dyeing a skein of *asenag* wool for Edilet's use, and Talemr came by to invite him to a Council session. He'd been elected Coordinator, and wanted Peter to hear him give his first speech in that position. They'd become good friends, thanks to the hours they'd spent in deep conversation about how the Council worked. He'd been to Talemr's home often, shared dinner with Talemr's family (a characteristically deferential mate and four obedient children), and even gone on a long trip to the mountains with them to see the Glowing Caves.

"You are welcome ... at the Council for what I ... be very interesting to you."

"What was that?" Peter asked; he'd been unable to catch the softer sounds. He'd learned to concentrate hard when an Ipli spoke to him, and was sure that he hadn't forgotten to pay attention when something other than the mouth sounded.

"I said, you are welcome ... at the Council..." Talemr stopped. The Ipli were not as adept at reading facial expressions as humans, but Talemr had obviously noticed something in Peter's look. "Is there something wrong,

friend?"

"I think there is."

A doctor in the colony confirmed it. According to the tests, he'd lost some of his hearing because of the verbal onslaught, to the point where he simply couldn't detect the quieter tones that transmitted pleasant feelings. Dr. Wei recommended an implant, and when Peter told Talemr about it, the Councilor said, "As is needed. There must be conversation. Perhaps your own language is good for us, for now?"

"No!" They were sitting outside Talemr's cabin, on deep chairs that virtually swallowed whoever sat in them. Ipli walking by engaged Peter and Talemr in brief exchanges before moving on.

"But it is ... good for me to learn and speak," Talemr insisted.

"Friend, the day is long and bright!" a female said as she walked her brood down to the river for some communal bathing.

"As it is!" Talemr replied. "Enjoy ... the sunshine."

"Friend," Peter said, "I came to learn, not darken your world with my stories. That is why—"

"Peter, your colors are good!" someone shouted to him out of the unceasing rumble of talk that came from a group of Ipli gathered nearby. "Your blues are sharp!"

"Thank you! Talemr, that is why I must fix this problem. If I can't hear you ... well, there can't be conversation."

"Yes, friend, and there must be conversation." A pair of Ipli wanted to discuss something that happened in Council, and Peter sat silently, listening in as best he could. Talemr had to know how strongly he felt, how badly

Peter wanted to know everything he could about Ipli life; he'd even tried studying exosociology at university, although the academic approach hadn't appealed to him at all. If he and Talemr spoke English, Peter might as well be living with the other Terrans.

When Talemr was finally able to resume their discussion he said, "All must speak, friend."

"I know. And all must hear."

Talemr's eyes widened, and the skin around them was pushed into intricate folds. "Yes," he replied, "listen!"

That night, Peter called up to the Terran station that was orbiting Osiah, Foralla's nearest planetary neighbor. The Ipli, like other Forallans, preferred the sight of bare walls (they saved their art for public display), so as he waited for the signals to traverse space, he had no decorations to gaze at. Jo's image appeared at last on the screen, asking her caller to start.

"Jo, hi, it's Peter. I've run into a small problem here, and I wanted to talk to you about it. I have to get a cochlear implant; I guess all that shouting I told you about before finally took its toll.

"I've wanted to come here ever since I began reading about these beings, but I never thought I'd pay a price like this for it. I've learned a lot so far, but you can't learn much if you're deaf." That was a bit melodramatic, but he didn't retract it. While he was seeing her up on the station she'd accused him of being overly dramatic at times, but as far as he was concerned, that was because she didn't share his love for Iplian culture. The Ipli had evolved from a creature that built and shared nests, and constantly exchanged

information on food sites and possible dangers. Little had changed in the amount they spoke, while the subjects of their exchanges became more complex. Every part of their lives was rich with expression, from their clothes to their music, and Peter wanted to learn whatever he possibly could about their art. On Foralla, the term "art of conversation" really meant something. Jo, on the other hand, was a scientist.

"Dr. Wei ordered an implant for me from your medical stocks up there. She said normal transport might take quite some time, given that my condition 'isn't exactly life-threatening,' as she put it. Is there anything you can do to speed this up?

"I have to get to bed soon. If you reply in the next five minutes or so, I'll have time to answer back. Otherwise, catch you later."

He couldn't think of how to word his feelings for her—he missed her, was still fond of her, but saying "Love you" seemed not terribly wise or fair for a number of reasons. So he just added, "Answer soon, okay?" and left it at that. When the screen asked him whether he wanted to transmit, he said, "Yes" and watched it flicker to a solid blue. Before the "Another call?" message appeared he tapped the chrome pad on the side of the board to close the line.

Like his parents, Jo hadn't fully understood his determination to live amongst the Ipli. His father in particular thought he was exaggerating when he described the Ipli as beings so interesting you could want to spend your whole life learning about them. Peter had invited Jo to join him on the planet, but she said she was just as devoted to

her research as he was to studying the Ipli.

"And more realistic," she said, not wanting to be insensitive but ending up so, "because you'll never be able to understand them fully."

"I should try," he said. "And not from some Terran ghetto where you get only a superficial picture."

"Why is it so important to you?" Again, she didn't mean that to sound dismissive; she was simply curious.

"If you're going to do anything, you should do it fully." And if he were to learn about the Ipli, he needed to avoid contaminating them with *his* knowledge, *his* planetary outlook, *his* "stories" (as the Ipli put it). He didn't want to sully the record with Terran adulterations. He was there to learn, not teach.

Jo had no answer to that; he knew she admired him for his dedication, and he felt the same about her. It was too bad that even though they were side-by-side in cosmic terms, they lived so far from each other in real ones.

She didn't reply before he had to leave the next morning, no matter how much he kept delaying; finally, he took his gloves and facemask off the top of the single-drawer bureau that held his things, and headed for Edilet's odorous work-cabin. Maybe he'd be able to drown his fears in labor and dye.

Edilet, who always awoke and went to work long before Peter, was supervising the stirring of a vat of scarlet in the dyeing room when he arrived. The Ipli used far more animal than plant fibers in their clothes and expressive pennants, because dyes adhered to them better, and so the large cabin was

festooned with wool. Peter's job was to add mordants to the dyes, which were made from plants and ground sedimentary rock. He'd studied enough chemistry and Iplian biology to know which minerals to use, which plants offered the strongest concentrations of tannic acid. Edilet had learned early to appreciate his help; he'd been assigned the task of playing host to Peter, but had never expected his Terran guest to become an employee, too.

Peter donned the facemask and gloves and, using the bucket hanging from a bolt in the wall, began measuring alum and tannic acid into Edilet's scarlet. Red was one of the more rare colors that could be extracted from the planet's fauna; Peter figured the yarn they were making would be used for some special purpose.

"Are you well?" Edilet asked.

"I am well, friend."

"I am ... glad, because you've seemed troubled." At least, that's what Peter made of the low murmurs coming from the pouches beside Edilet's mouth.

"My ears. They're not used to your speech."

Edilet looked at him strangely, and Peter realized his translator—perhaps fooled by Peter's mask—had used the singular rather than plural "you."

"The speech of the Ipli," Peter said, and Edilet returned to his work. "Forgive my errors."

"It needs not to be said." Then Edilet began regaling him with his experiences of the day, beginning with breakfast (not a very engaging story) and detailing what he'd done with his dyes so far. Peter listened, but words slipped away from him no matter how hard he

concentrated. Every scrape of the mixing stick in the vat, every slosh of liquid, every burst of speech coming from outside made it all the more difficult to follow Edilet's story. If only he had that implant...

Edilet finally made it to the point of Peter's arrival, recounting the event as if it were something extraordinary, and then said, "You will color; I must weave."

"Yes. Is there some special circumstance?"

"Yes. But I will not say. What has been your morning?"

So Peter told him, in as much detail as he could. His translator turned his words into vocalizations, clicks, aspirations, all the range of sounds that the Ipli made and that only a computer could mimic—barely. Of course, much would get lost; human speech simply didn't share that expressive range, and Terrans needed their faces and semantics to convey feelings. It never ceased to frustrate Peter that his every speech would be so unavoidably distorted. He wondered what he really sounded like to an Ipli: probably a machine, appropriately enough.

"You asked our friend Jo on the station for help?"

"Yes." As part of his life here, he had to share not only his experiences, but also his friends.

"You want the implant?" Edilet asked.

"Of course." Again that incomprehension—what was going on?

"And you will not let us speak in your language?"

"I came to learn, not impose my speech and stories on you."

"I understand—" Edilet said, as if

ready to say more. But he remained silent—at least for a moment. Then he began talking about some relatives who lived in a different village, how their crops were faring, how the children grew. Whenever Peter thought he was hearing Edilet pretty well, a word or even an entire phrase would disappear, and his heart would sink.

Come on, Jo, he thought. *Come through.*

At the end of the afternoon, the cabin was draped with drying red strands of *asenag* wool ready to be spun into yarn and wound onto spools. Edilet, meanwhile, worked on a penant of some kind—Peter still didn't know how to read them—and then announced that it was time for dinner. They walked to the district dining hall for their communal meal and, as they neared the city's central square, the noise of the crowd funneling into the huge building grew exponentially. Inside, at the interlocking oval tables, the Ipli kept up a steady roar. As a guest of the city and indeed of the country, Peter was always honored with a "corner" seat where two tables (and therefore two groups of speakers) converged. He kept up as best he could, but it was impossible to follow what others were saying, and even harder to make himself understood given his translator's limitations. And when it made errors, as it was bound to do, he sometimes had no way of catching them.

"Did your ... work go..."

"Find the main reason and stick to it."

"What was that, friend? Your machine speaks like a foreigner, I'm afraid. How does it...?"

"Do you still find our ... air too rich for your blood?"

When he got home that evening, drained and ready to collapse onto his bed, he found a message from Jo waiting for him. The sight of her face made him smile.

"Hi, Peter. Got your message. I'll try to get your implant on a priority shuttle run; it's small, it won't really be much of a problem. Maybe Lana can carry it down personally for you. She's the only pilot I know well enough to ask." She paused, and her dark eyes lowered for a second. After a couple of blinks, she flashed a wistful grin, deepening the already heavy lines around her mouth. "I miss you, too, Peter. I'm sorry things ... I've said that often enough already, haven't I? I wasn't going to give up studying Osiah's weather; you weren't going to give up becoming Ipli." She bit her lower lip. "Next time you come to the station, look me up!" She laughed, then said, "I can't tell you how sorry I was to hear about this. I know how much it all means to you."

Peter swallowed.

"I'll let you know if I can arrange things. Take care, Peter. And really, come up for a visit soon." Her image disappeared suddenly, as if she'd smacked the pad to cut the com, and Peter leaned back, rubbing his temples.

Their time together had been brief but intense—the way his relationships always were. But being so close to Ipli had made him anxious to get down to Foralla as quickly as possible, and he'd left her with what was probably cruel speed. He simply couldn't afford to let things get too strong between them.

Peter took the day off work to attend

the Council session. It was an incredible opportunity to see how the government of the district worked, a privilege few humans had enjoyed and, on top of that, he would be able to hear his friend express his vision for the Ipli. With his palmbook, Peter took copious notes—on Talem's speech, on procedures, on the ceremonial waving of small square parti-colored cloths. Talem was in favor of more exchanges—cultural and trade—with humans, and saw the Ipli as eventually sharing Terran ships as they ventured further into space. Peter had to restrain the urge to applaud along with the Councilors who agreed.

Afterward, Peter joined Talem on the brief but chaotic walk from the parliament. As busy as Talem may have been during his days as a Councilor, it was nothing compared to how many Ipli approached him now, assailing him with questions and requests. Females—who had little public role in Iplian (and Forallan) society generally—also came to petition him: they sought changes in bathing and washing schedules, how property was distributed to survivors, and other areas Peter could barely comprehend.

During a brief lull, Peter told him he was sure his friends on the station would be able to expedite shipment of his implant, and Talem nodded, looking only half-pleased. Peter tried to draw him out, but Talem only said, "You can't understand." He poked Peter with a long finger, then leaned a gray arm against Peter's shoulder. "But I am happy for you! When do you think your ship will come?" he asked, straining to click his question loudly enough.

"They told me a priority transport is scheduled to come tomorrow. I could get it then."

They were interrupted by a Councilor desperate to whisper something in Talemr's ear. Talemr responded with a series of unvocalized breaths signaling reluctant agreement. He turned once more to Peter, raised his left articulated horn, and said something with the hollow in the joint, but Peter missed it. Talemr tried again; it was hopeless. The Ipli sometimes emphasized their points with hand-gestures and, with his delicate fingers, Talemr motioned for calmness, then tongued, "I want you to feel better. I ... hope you ... get what you need."

"Thank you, friend." The box on his chest struggled against the Iplian din to get his message to Talemr, and Peter had to hope that it got through.

A screech from behind him signaled that Edilet was coming toward him, ready to describe his morning's activities. Peter listened carefully, trying above all not to lose the lower-register words, the ones that signaled private conditions.

"A morning when ... very painful ... we threaded four types of tribe-leaf in one display, just for the sake of your ship..."

"My ship?" So that was it! Edilet had been weaving a commemorative pennant in honor of his ship's—and his implant's—arrival. Peter smiled broadly at the wonderful gesture.

"Yes. A grand ... day for us all."

When it was his turn, Peter said, "I have spoken to the Coordinator," with Talemr patiently standing right there, exchanging words with petitioners or simply awaiting the conclusion of the

narrative. Peter had to detail their conversation to satisfy his cabin-mate's need for full verbal communion, no matter how dull those details might seem. In fact, the more boring the narrative, the more completely at one his cabin-mate would feel. Edilet listened intensely, ear-flaps bending toward the box on Peter's chest to filter out the square's ambient noise, and he nodded as Peter came to what he hoped would be a rhetorically effective conclusion. "Such was my enjoyable listening as I learned my friend's will."

Edilet shouted his pleasure and Talemr said, "Good speech." That the compliment came from a Coordinator made it very special indeed. Edilet motioned his head to his left and bade him adieu; his multicolored tunic gleamed in the sun's pinkish light.

"But, Peter," Talemr said, "remember that there must be learning." Since his election, Talemr had been pressuring Peter even more strongly to strike a greater balance in their own exchange of information.

"I remember. But I came to learn from you," Peter said, as he had countless times before. "Not to darken—"

"You do not 'darken' but illuminate. Learning is key," Talemr said. "There must be learning," he repeated, just as a Councilor accosted him to engage in a high-pitched, angry diatribe about something said during the meeting—Peter couldn't catch what. He took the opportunity to withdraw (with proper "goodbye" and bows, of course) and return to his cabin.

The streets of the capital were perpetually thronged with Ipli, and Peter always had to squeeze through the crowds to get anywhere, at the same

time trying to avoid jamming himself against the buildings. Iplian houses were bulbous structures that he often bumped into painfully during his first year or so on the planet, and he still had trouble negotiating corners without getting at least a superficial scrape somewhere. He'd never entirely lost his human need to preserve a cordon of personal space around himself, and it still made him uncomfortable to have beings pressing him from all sides at every moment. Sometimes he simply had to escape the city, even if he considered it a sign of weakness, and rush into the hills where he could get some peace and quiet, and delicious solitude. He'd made it his goal to learn about Iplian life by immersing himself in a way no scholar ever had—but he needed a break sometimes.

He muscled his way through hordes walking, and screaming, toward him. He'd learned enough of the language to catch even the smallest fragments of conversations, provided the words were loud enough for him to hear: snatches of exchanges about food deliveries from the agricultural lands to the north, about the weather, about a sculpture contest. If he wanted to be truly a part of this society, he had to join into the din, contribute to the ongoing (and literally deafening) chatter, but he simply couldn't come up with enough trivia to regale others with, so he just returned some greetings and told Ipli he barely knew how well he was feeling today.

By Iplian standards, then, he remained fairly silent right up to his arrival at his cabin, the rock-and-cloth structure the Ipli had assigned to him with their characteristic generosity. It

was in a very desirable part of town, right near the parliament and close to the market where Iplian and offworld foodstuffs were sold. At first, Talemr automatically supplied him with a home in the midst of the Terran ghetto on the other side of the city, but Peter had objected, and so Talemr made all the necessary arrangements for him to move in with Edilet, displacing Edilet's long-time cabin-mate in the process.

Peter rolled up the door and entered, dropping down immediately onto the seat in front of his board. No messages awaited him. He uploaded his notes on the Council meeting to the board's memory, and then devoted some time to studying Iplian color symbolism. There was meaning underlying not just individual colors but how they were combined as well, and he wished he could read those pennants and cloths.

Even more, he wanted to call up to the station and get an update. He'd just have to be patient, to wait for Jo's call.

But as soon as he awoke the next day, he called the station, and tapped his middle finger against the board as he endured the delay. When the double beep signaled that he'd made contact, Peter punched in Jo's number.

"Peter! Hi!"

To his amazement he was talking directly to her—their schedules meshed so rarely. He matched her grin with one of his own. "It's great to see you, Jo."

Peter waited out the long pause; he always found it a bit strange after weeks of the fast exchanges of Iplian conversation to switch to time-delay mode. "Same here. How are you doing?"

Then her smile faded as she realized the question was now more than just a greeting.

"Okay, I guess. I'll be better soon, though; give me some good news."

The delay was agonizing. Then her expression really darkened, and Peter began to fear the worst. She said, "Lana will have something for you—"

"That's great!"

"But, um, I got a call from your friends down there."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You'll see. I don't know what's going on, but it really sounded as if they don't want you to get that implant."

"What do you mean?" This was crazy. Could Talemr actually stop the shipment if he wanted to? But why would he want to?

"Peter, I really don't know much more than that. Talemr will explain everything to you." Then she changed the subject, asking him about his life on Foralla, and talking about her research. But the last thing he wanted to listen to was weather reports on Osiah. She said, "Stop worrying, Peter, really."

"How can I? I don't know what this is all about."

"All I can say is what Talemr said to me. 'Peter must learn to hear.'"

Perhaps there was some taboo in Iplian society about using technology to help with hearing. Or they thought he wasn't trying hard enough. A million theories ran through his mind.

"Peter, please. It's okay." Jo's hand reached up, and he could tell she was holding on to the top of the screen. "You really want to be down there for good, don't you?"

"For good?" He hadn't thought about it in those terms, hadn't thought about the rest of his life. "I don't know—"

"More than you ever wanted to be with me. Or anybody."

"No, that's not true."

But maybe she was right. Maybe he'd never felt this kind of passion for any of the women he'd met, although at the time he would have sworn that, yes, they were everything to him. With Jo it had been different, because he'd already decided where he truly wanted to be, and it wasn't on that station. "Is that the real reason you didn't want to come down here with me?"

"Yeah. You wouldn't have cared that much if I were with you or not. I wasn't all that—I guess *meaningful*—to you." She wasn't happy with the word, but gave up trying to find a better one. "I just want you to be happy. It sounds clichéd but it's the truth."

"I know." Then he said, "Thanks," but there was no way he could really communicate how much he meant it, felt it.

"I love you," she said, and cut the com, leaving him sitting there, unable to move, unable to think.

A throng of Ipli and humans gathered at the port for the arrival of the shuttle, standing outside the cabin-like terminal building. The shuttle was carrying supplies to help the Terrans cope with the upcoming winter, and medical biocultures to help them cope with Forallan germs. But the other Terrans couldn't have been any more anxious than he was to see the ship arrive.

The din at the port was almost as great as the one that filled the hall at

meals; excited voices were raised to levels that almost made him glad for his damaged ears. Shrieks aimed point-blank at him from all sides were slightly muffled, and delicate clicks and aspirated sounds escaped him entirely—he could see the various parts of Ipli faces moving, but could make out nothing of what they said. Meanwhile, a few Ipli carrying wind and percussion instruments expressed their excitement through streams of raucous notes. Peter's ears felt as if they were wrapped in velvet. His box made every word *he* said audible and comprehensible to others—the opposite of how he wanted things to go. *Their* words mattered, not his; he was wasting his time here if he wasn't learning from *them*. And he couldn't learn from them if he couldn't hear them.

Talemr suddenly emerged from the crowd moving toward the port, and Peter blinked in surprise. Surely a Coordinator had better things to do than attend a shuttle landing. "Hello!" Peter said. "It is very good to see you here."

"There will be learning," Talemr said. Peter tried to read something into Talemr's words or appearance, but it was almost impossible to catch the connotations of Iplian speech. "I told you." But Peter refused to believe that his friend was betraying him somehow, for some reason. The one thing he knew for sure was that Talemr was not about to say anything explicit.

Edilet was there, too, holding aloft the cloth he'd woven in honor of the ship's arrival, and he bowed to Peter in proper cabin-mate fashion. He then launched into a narrative of the cloth's weaving—although he didn't explain

the precise meaning of the pennant's shapes and colors. He ended with, "All must learn, friend, all must learn."

So Edilet knew something, too. But before Peter could ask him what was going on, Talemr said, "You are a very brave person to want to be of us. You have been alone."

"By my choice," Peter reminded him. "I am not sorry." But yes, despite what Jo had said, it would have been nice to have her here—he would have loved to share all this with her. To explain himself to Talemr, he used a familiar Iplian formula: "I want you to understand my wishes."

"And I do the same," Talemr replied pointedly.

In a few moments Peter heard (clearly enough) the whine of the ship's passage through Foralla's atmosphere, and when he looked up saw the needle appear through the high clouds. The Terran vessel aimed like a dart at the leafy field, surrounded by a halo of dissipated heat. Humans and Ipli took up positions on the edge of the field.

A group of Ipli children, herded by their teachers, stood huddled not far from where Peter was, and their ceaseless chatter brought home to him just how instinctive was the Iplian need to talk. To understand the Ipli was to hear them. The children, still dressed in the drab outfits they would wear till they were old enough to express themselves through cloth, intently watched and pointed at the descending ship, the novelty of it turning Peter's necessity into their magic.

The pale green ship descended until it blew jets of supporting air down onto the field. The tiny leaves below flickered into a blurred mass under the

ship's anti-grav. In a blink, the ship simply settled onto the field, and the unloaders rushed forward, pulling wheeled and flying carts behind them. Peter followed, not sure just how close he would be able to get to the ship before they'd notice him and maybe shoo him away. Talemr and Edilet waited by the terminal, in a sea of perpetually talking, perpetually moving, brightly clothed beings.

The shuttle's side-hatch dropped open just as the unloaders moved in, revealing plastic crates in various sizes and colors. Peter could hear the children's voices rise in both pitch and volume as the alien objects popped into view. Peter waited for an eternity near the cockpit hatch; it finally sprung, releasing a set of black rubber stairs, and the pilot emerged, squinting in the sunlight or perhaps the wind as she adjusted her loose-fitting white jacket. She seemed to be about Jo's age, except for some premature graying. When she saw Peter, she waved briefly, then came up to him holding out her hand.

"You must be Peter," she said. "Lana."

"Great to meet you at last."

"Come." She led him to a small table set up in the field not far from the terminal, where presumably workers met to share meals on breaks. She reached into her jacket pocket and brought out a small package, square and wrapped in anti-magnetic foil.

"You'll have to sign for that," she said. She took a reader from yet another pocket and he thumbed it. "Jo sends her regards, by the way."

"Thanks."

"Have to run." She raised her hand

when she saw Peter getting ready to express his gratitude for the delivery. "Never mind. Glad to help." With that, she rushed into the terminal; he'd have to find out from Jo what he could do for her in return.

Talemr and Edilet walked over to the table. "Sit," Talemr said, and they all lowered themselves onto the benches attached to the table's trunk. Peter tore open the package, but instead of a cellopack containing tiny black chips, all he found inside was a board-card.

"What the hell is this?" he said aloud, before he could stop himself, and listened in dismay while the box on his chest translated his words into something equally vulgar. His face burned; he'd have to apologize...

But the very words he was about to say came from behind. "Forgive me," Talemr said. "I said there must be learning."

The card was labeled "USL-Tutorial"; the initials meant nothing to him, but were in a font that suggested a trademark or brand name.

He looked up at Talemr. "Please explain, friend. I'm very—I don't understand." In a rush of panic he thought this might be Talemr's way of sending him a message, maybe that it was time to leave.

"Your implant has been sent to the doctor. You may still have it if you wish. Later." Talemr bowed his wide head. "First, please let us try to learn."

He couldn't imagine what instructions the card might contain. Talemr's fingers once more gestured soothingly. Peter said, "Talemr, my friend, what is this? I only want to hear you again, to hear your stories! Explain."

"Read the card."

Peter slowly walked home, past the group of children, past their pennant-displaying teachers. He barely noticed the Ipli around him, and knew he was being rude by not responding to their queries or asking ones of his own. He scraped his arm turning a corner, but ignored the pain, and didn't even look to see if he was bleeding.

He flopped down onto the chair before his board, and loaded the card into the slot beneath the screen. When he touched the pad, the screen filled with the words: "Universal Sign Language."

Talemr entered then and, as he saw his friend standing in silhouette against the bright Iplian sun, Peter felt

his anger drain away.

"Do you see?" Talemr asked. "A conversation is an exchange. You wanted none. I understand; you wanted to learn. But there cannot be conversation without exchange. Do you see?" The Ipli would learn from him, speak a language from his planet, or there would be no speaking at all.

Peter did see, now, how foolish he'd been, to miss such an important truth about his hosts. He pulled the card from its slot. Without exchange there is no conversation. Without conversation there is no life.

"I see," Peter said, looking down at the card. Then he smiled. "And I hear you, Talemr. At last." 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: ALLAN WEISS lives in Toronto. He has published fiction in a number of magazines and anthologies; his mainstream works have appeared in such journals as *Fiddlehead*, *NeWest Review*, and *Windsor Review*, and his SF stories in (among other places) *Prairie Fire*, *Tesseract*⁴, and, most recently, *Arrowdreams*. To pay the bills, he teaches part-time and does bibliographic work. "Exchange" is dedicated to Sharry Walderman.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: LYNNE TAYLOR FAHNESTALK has been illustrating professionally for 18 years. Her artwork will appear on the cover of the anthology *What if...? Amazing Stories Selected by Monica Hughes* this fall, published by McClelland & Stewart. She also recently met Brian Froud and now truly believes in Bad Fairies.

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Chasing the Dragon on the Sea of Tranquillity

by Steven Mills
illustrated by Mark Savona

I got kinda drunk last Saturday night.

Okay, very drunk.

I never drink when I'm on standby. Never.

Never before, anyway.

My wife and I had just split up the night before and I was feeling like crap. She wanted my stuff out of the flat in forty-eight hours or she'd huck it all into the airlock and I could goddamn well pick it up off two hectares of moonscape.

So I got myself good and pissed. Started shooting tequila at BJ's with some of the crew who'd been out at the substation when I was there. Roger and Donna and Kwan and that Québécois hard-ass, what's his name? Guy. Told war stories and drank till I couldn't stand up.

Jesus. Hard to believe I've been here four years now.

The scenery's the shits, but the pay is great, and quite frankly, the rush is even better.

Back in Calgary an MVA was just an MVA. Broken bones, cervical-spine immobilization, possible cardiac tamponade from the steering wheel, 'cause the bag malfunctioned. Intubate, ventilate, monitor for tension pneumothorax. Chest decompression, pericardiocentesis, if needed, and transport, lights and sirens.

Here, it's quiet like you wouldn't believe. The sheer silence of flatline in one-sixth gee.

Gail flew ore freighters, and she and her crew were regulars at BJ's.

We went out three times before we actually fucked. My hands, she said, she

liked my hands, how long and straight my fingers were. And I played rhythms on her G-spot, ate her, melted into her.

I remember the sharp taste of her crotch even now—that very first time, after an all-nighter over at BJ's. I was only a little drunk that night. Just scotch and ice.

Then we went for breakfast at Emilio's, down by the goldfish pond in front of the library. It was a quiet morning, a Saturday. We ate real eggs, scrambled lightly with pepper and basil and some cheese. Monterey Jack.

Being on the moon makes people horny and stupid, they say. And God knows I've been stupid.

I really thought it was forever. All those things we promised each other. Somehow I've pissed them all away. We got married six months after I came moonside. I didn't even believe in marriage, but Gail asked me so I said yes. All that I'll-never-get-married shit went right out the window.

That was back when I was doing dome work. Back when she and I used to laugh all the time.

My first year I got that medal. Like some hero, eh? For saving that kid's life, they said. She was trapped underneath the girders in the turbo shaft. Fuck knows how she got in there, but the lift took her arm off like a razor—mid-humerus. And because she was a kid, and not some old arthritic fart, people got all excited.

It was an easy call, but I got a medal for it. With clean amputations, bleeding is usually self-limited: the sliced arteries just spasm. Sure, it took almost an hour to free her, but that had nothing to do with me. That

was the extrication goons, the heave-hos. I just set up a lifeline, and told her stories about kids I don't have. Got her laughing. Kept her alert and her BP up. Brave kid.

That, too, was back when I was working the dome.

Gail and I rented a flat in the park district, and whiled away hours in our bed experimenting with each other. We walked in Apollo Park, holding hands just like in the movies. Gail hated cooking more than me, so we ate out most of the time, or nuked packaged lasagna at home.

I'd tell her stories about calls I did back in Calgary.

Like the one about the guy who got his dick sucked up into the vacuum cleaner hose and it swelled so much he couldn't get it out again—those sex games can get a little out of hand. And how his partner actually pissed herself laughing while we tried to support the long extension piece and load him in the ambulance as discreetly as possible.

Then people were needed to staff the substations at the mines. And even though Gail didn't like it, I said I'd go, that I wanted the industrial experience. But it was mostly band-aid stuff. So we sat around on our duffs all day and got rusty and soft while being paid.

Being rusty is a bad thing. A really bad thing. But being bored is even worse. We did week-on, week-off shifts. Played canasta, chess, backgammon, mah jong. Watched a million videos.

Meant I was away from home way too much. Away from Gail. We'd fight within the first two days, getting used

to each other again, have three, four, good days, then I'd be back out at the substation. And she worked four days on, four days off, flying freighters between the dome and the mines.

But the company decided it was too expensive to keep trauma techs sitting out there at the mining substations. So they closed down all but the two main stations, and set the rest of us Lunatics up with a small fleet of hovercrafts based at the dome. The hovercrafts are fast. They have to be. On the moon there's not much of a window between crashing and coding. The company equipped the hovercrafts with advanced life-support toys, and airlocks, and pressurized them so that we could get our patients out of their suits as soon as we got them inside our car.

Being based at the dome meant I was going to be living at home full-time again. So we both took time off and celebrated. Kind of a honeymoon.

We spent three days at this spa resort up in the northeast quadrant of Tranquillity. Wasn't too popular yet. Got ourselves massaged and steamed and whirlpooled and wrapped in some kind of green herbal goo. Then we spent two days in the hotel room catching up on videos we'd wanted to watch together: some good tear-jerkers, a couple of high-class porn flicks, and a really old monster-from-outer-space movie.

Gail continued to fly freighters and I got teamed up with Amy and Cecil to work the Sea. And things just seemed to get a lot more serious once I started doing out-of-dome work. Out there on the lunar surface when people need a paramedic, it mostly means they're really fucked. A metal sliver in the

finger can mean a hole in the suit. And that can mean bye-bye.

Me and Amy and Cece hit it off right away. We were the best. Echo Car—find 'em, fix 'em, fly 'em home. And drink. Amy was a scotch-aholic. Cece, rum and cocaine. Me, I'm a tequila man myself, straight and cold. Scotch on quieter days.

Company worked us hard. Call volume was pretty high and we worked twelve-hour shifts, four on, two off.

The hovercrafts meant that we got to sail the Sea. We cruised the shipping routes, the mines, and the resort areas. Closest car gets the call.

And they retrained us to work the suit monitors, to run diagnostics on them, patch into the vitals directory, and push that data right through to the Trauma Center at the dome.

Y'know, out on the Sea of Tranquillity, it doesn't matter dick if you can intubate or start a lifeline. What matters is keeping the suit from breaching, and if it does breach, what you can do about it. 'Cause your patient is either going to freeze his dick off or furnace-fry his ass.

And even if the seals hold and the suit doesn't tear, but the poor shit inside is all busted up, there's not a helluvalot you can do without being able to get inside the suit.

The first call me and Amy and Cece did together looked like the patient's sailplane clipped the rampart, then tumbled a hundred meters to a ledge just above the floor.

Cece got us to her by slipping the hovercraft down the north wall of the crater. Thought we were going to flip for sure, but we didn't. Cece can drive.

Unstable compression fractures to C3 and 4, possible fractures at T6 and 7. Fracture to the left femur, mid-third, closed. BP okay. Rest of the vitals stable.

At least according to the monitor on her chest.

But shit. The girl starts coding. Of course, I can't touch her, can't ventilate her, 'cause of the suit. Not a goddamn thing I can do till she's inside an airlock. But if I move her, she's a quad for sure. If I don't move her, she's dead for sure. She hates me no matter what.

Sorry, darlin'. You're fucked.

We pick her up with the clamshell, drop her into the basket stretcher, strap her in and skid back down the dust slope to the hovercraft. Inside, Amy and I cut her suit open and start working on her while Cece gets us out of the crater and rockets us back to the Trauma Center at the dome.

Gail got the partner thing easily enough. The bond when partners click. The bond between me and Amy and Cece.

"That was Amy," Gail said, keying off the phone screen.

I pulled the pillow over my head. We'd stayed up way too late talking about the shuttle job Gail was thinking of bidding on.

"She's a mess," Gail said. "Big bender last night. Looks like she's crashing pretty hard. She's at her flat."

"Ah, Jesus," I said. It was our first day off together in three weeks.

"Go on." She rocked me with her bare foot. "So much for our plans, eh?" She went into the bathroom, and I heard the shower come on. She stuck

her head back in the bedroom. "C'mon, get up. I'll be here when you get back."

Gail and I'd spend our days off together sailplaning or hanging out at BJ's shooting pool, or sometimes we'd just cuddle together on the couch, discussing our plans to go to Australia sometime before our contracts ran out, before we had to decide whether or not to stay on the moon for another five-year stint. She wanted to fly me across the wide belly of the outback, and then take me to where she grew up, a small town north of Melbourne, to meet her little sister.

She wanted to see her nieces. Both had been born since she'd come moonside.

I wanted to see where she came from, the neighborhood she grew up in, the park she used to sneak off to in the middle of the night with her fourteen-year-old girlfriends.

I wanted to pet a real live kangaroo.

Me and Amy and Cece were busy as hell out on the Sea. Everything was booming—mining, tourism, construction. Trauma.

Then Kilo Car totaled their hovercraft when a crater rampart slid out from under them. And there was so much in-fighting in two other crews that the company just up and fired the whole lot of them. But because they were contracted to provide so much coverage, the company just set up a new schedule for the remaining crews while they trained new recruits. No union here.

We were still working twelve-hour shifts, but eight days on and two off,

instead of four and two.

It was stupid. Everybody started getting tired.

The dispatcher fucked up transmission of the coordinates on a call to a crawler roll-over. Took us way too long to find the guy.

Amy and I worked our asses off getting down inside the crawler to where he was trapped.

Suit integrity, clear. Systems functioning green. BP, 150 over 110. Pulse, 96. Respirations, 32. Skin, diaphoretic and pale. I'm having trouble seeing his eyes 'cause he's fogging up the goddamn visor. Quit breathing so fast, asshole.

"Jesus, Amy. Where's that extrication crew?"

"Ask Tranquillity—ah, shit, monitor says he's not breathing anymore."

"Fuck. Tranquillity Base, Echo Car."

"Echo Car, Tranquillity Base. Go ahead."

"Tranquillity, where the hell's that extrication car? It shoulda been here already!"

"ETA is twelve minutes."

"Twelve minutes! Christ, you might as well cancel them, then, and we'll just start digging a fucking grave. I've got a thirty-three-year-old male in respiratory arrest, pinned inside a crawler cockpit, and you tell me twelve minutes?"

"Echo Car, give me a landline when you're done there."

"Just get me a goddamn extrication car, okay?"

I got suspended for that.

Amy was living with this guy from the Delta Car crew, big weightlifter type. Then she found out he was fucking

around on her: she walked in on him and some petite doctor from the Trauma Center in bed together, him busy pumping her from behind. She threw him out on his bulging ass, but started hanging at BJ's more than usual.

She called me, pissed out of her mind for the third night in a row, and crying and going on about how stupid she was.

I keyed the phone screen off and got up.

Gail shoved her chair back and crossed her arms. "That girl should get some help, y'know."

"Yeah, I know. Look, I need to go—"

"Aw, come on! We had plans to-night."

"Yeah, I know, I'm sorry. But I'll be back—"

"Yeah, I know, you're sorry. But she's your partner, and I'm just your wife." She stood up, took her coffee mug off the table.

"That's apples and oranges," I said, reaching for my boots.

"Like hell it is. She calls, you go, no matter what."

"I'd do the same for you," I said, "but you never need me."

"I need you all the time. But you're always off with your *partners*, working standby or drinking or rescuing them from their little personal crises. Don't they have any goddamn friends?" She shook her head, then turned and walked away, through the door into the kitchen.

When a freighter goes down with four crew on board in the middle of the freezing lunar night, we hope like hell Dispatch has the right coordinates.

And every single time I pray to God

it isn't Gail, crushed down inside the cockpit, visor smashed, face frozen.

Dispatch tries to patch into the downed ship's on-board to get the crew's medical history. Depends on the ship's software.

Sometimes they lose radio contact and we have to find them via their mayday beacon. And sometimes we just don't find them.

We found them this time, though.

Three dead when Amy and Cece and I arrived. Mushed like dog food. Their suits had come apart. There was shit and blood and bits of skin all around the cockpit, which was only a meter wide in places after the freighter impacted and skidded into the escarpment.

But number four had ejected just before impact. We found him using the bio-tracker system, which isn't always very reliable.

For some reason his suit monitor hadn't initiated its personal mayday beacon, otherwise he'd have been a snap to find. Dispatch would have just pinpointed him on the grid for us. Thought maybe he didn't have one. The personal ones are expensive, and some idiots figure you don't really need one.

Amy and I went out to him. Cece staffed the car, brought it as close as was safe—goddamn hovercrafts blow up so much dust, sometimes you bury your patient.

"Suit monitor says the beacon's sounding," Amy said, as she ran the diagnostic. "Hey, thanks for dragging my butt out of BJ's last night. Again."

"Sure, no problem," I said. "Has to be a malfunction. Nobody's picking up the guy's signal."

"Gail must be getting pissed at me."

"Ah, don't worry about it. It's not your fault. Anyway, it's me she's pissed at."

I plugged into his vitals directory. He was still moving, but I couldn't talk to him 'cause his radio was toast, so I held him down with my hand, trying to keep him still until we could get some sort of survey through his suit monitor. The vitals directory didn't give me anything unusual, though, and all the diagnostics on the suit monitor said everything was green.

The sonofabitch was barely hurt.

But he'd ejected from the ship, and protocol says to treat ejectees as being in need of full advanced support.

He kept trying to get up.

"Careful," Amy said, "he's starting to grab."

I tried to talk to him visor-to-visor, so he could read my lips, but he was thrashing around too much. Then he twisted suddenly and grabbed my arm.

"Hands off, asshole!" I said. "You tear my suit, I'll kill you myself."

"Jesus, take it easy," Amy said. "What's your problem?"

"He can't hear me anyway." I pried his gloved fingers off my arm.

"We aren't gonna be able to move him," Amy said. "Can't get the ejector module off him. Looks like he ejected too late and didn't have time to use the retros to slow himself down. The protection arms are crushed here and here—" She showed me. "—and this pin is twisted like licorice. He's gotta be cut out."

The guy starts thrashing like crazy, and I think he's seizing. But his vitals are okay. Suit's green. What the hell is the matter?

"Take it easy, man."

He was just scared, and wanted to know about his crewmates. One of them was his lover. Didn't take long to extricate him once the heave-hos arrived. They know their stuff.

Had a busted-up knee: patella smashed to shit from impact, but his suit didn't tear. The monitor had screwed up. It wasn't sending the beacon like it said it was. He could have been stuck out there, asphyxiating quietly as he ran out of oxygen. Kind of a nice, easy way to go, though. Trapped in the arms of an ejector, staring up at the stars, waiting for them to blink out.

Out here, when shit happens, it happens exponentially.

Dispatch sent us on a call for a buggy driver with a possible suit breach.

Looked like the buggy simply flipped over. Amy and I were on our knees beside the trapped driver. Cece was lifting the back end.

"Fuck!"

"What's the matter, Cece?"

"I'm losing pressure!"

"Amy, go!" I chin-switched the mike. "Tranquillity Base, Echo Car. Code 40. I say again, Code 40. We got a suit breach. We need backup. Now."

Amy had Cece down in the dust, doing a visual for the tear. Her mike clicked over to Dispatch. "Tranquillity, I've got a six-centimeter flap tear: lower right anterior, sector three. I'm patching, now." The patch kept sticking to her right glove.

I patched the third puncture in the buggy driver's suit, and began to repressurize him.

"Okay, I've got him patched," Amy

said. "Cece, I'm going for the extra pump." She bounded toward the hovercraft.

I could hear Cece on the crew channel counting to control his respirations.

She came back with the other portable pump, moving a bit too fast and skidding a little on her knees as she dropped beside Cece.

She hooked up the hose to his auxiliary port and spun the coupling. I heard the comforting *whoosh* as she began to pump him up.

"Patch is holding," Cece said. "Jesus Christ, how the hell did that happen?"

Then the Delta Car crew got killed on a call. All three of them, along with six heave-hos. The goddamn patient blew himself up while they were setting up the extrication equipment. Turns out he was some lunar-ecoterrorist on a suicide mission to blow up the Number Three Mine. Stupid motherfucker.

It was an ugly call. A really ugly call.

And Amy couldn't seem to let that one go, even after the shrink. Mind you, she'd been lovers with that muscle guy from the Delta crew. The prick.

Next shift out, we were first car on the scene for a downed hopper. It turned out to be a small one, with only the pilot on board, but he needed to be extricated.

The triage doctor on radio duty at the Trauma Center wouldn't give me permission to go inside the suit. Amy had the overlap suit all ready to go; I just needed authorization. I just needed the goddamn doctor to give me a green on it.

"There's a major suit breach," I

argued, after Amy had patched in a portable, going with her gut that something was wrong with the patient's suit monitor.

The chief dick heave-ho countered that they only needed three more minutes to complete extrication.

"It's a seven-point-five-centimeter tear: lower left posterior, sector one. Right where his ass is jammed against the cargo hull. We can't get to it to patch it."

"Give them the three minutes," the doctor said over the radio. "Don't be so gung-ho. Full respiratory *and* cardiac arrest, remember?"

Amy whacked the pump into his auxiliary port, spun the coupling to seal the joint, and began pouring freezing wet O₂ into his suit as fast as the pump would give it.

"In-suit temp's 58. Respirations, zero. Pulse, 88, weak. BP, 90 over 60, and dropping. Godammit, in three minutes he'll be toast. I'm sure he'll be delighted to wake up stir-fried, doctor."

"At least he'll wake up."

"I can go in, intubate, get the respirator going, and put freezers right on him."

"I'm sure you can."

"The U of Calgary studies on the OLS protocol—"

"Are you always this difficult?"

"Yes. Always."

"You're under orders. You go inside that suit before the patient's in full arrest, and I'll charge you. No more crap. Understood?"

The doctor was right. The bastard lived. And not one iota of brain damage. I'd have killed him if I'd have gone ahead with the overlap-suit protocol. I just wouldn't have gotten the

interior temperature of the OLS cool enough. The lunar surface temp was just too damn high that day. He'd have coded with the higher heat the instant I breached his suit to work on him. And they just don't defib well when that happens. Not well at all.

I have nightmares about that one.

In my dream, the patient codes on me every time I do the overlap-suit protocol, and I can't bring him back. I whack the joules on the defibrillator higher and higher, but he keeps flatlining. No electrical activity at all.

Never seen us package a critical so fast as when the heave-hos finally pulled that chunk of hull off him. Got him through the airlock and into the pressurized unit, then Cece cut his suit open while me and Amy worked his helmet so that I could get at his airway.

"Hook him up, Cece," Amy said, slapping freezers on his chest. "I wanna see his body echo."

Cece hooked him up while I intu-bated and set up the respirator.

"Let's get a lifeline going," I said, "then get us the hell outta here, Cece."

"Roger dodger, hotshot," Cece said.

Gail and I had a really big fight. About two months ago. She threw the good dishes. Not at me, but Jesus, there was a lot of broken china. She said that she was fed up with me being in a shitty mood all the time and shutting her out. And as far as she was concerned, I was drinking way too much. "I know the nightmares are bad. So do something. See the staff shrink. I'll go with you, if you want me to. But I'm not having this discussion again."

"What's the good in talking about them? It just makes them worse," I said.

"They'll go away."

"Bullshit they'll go away," she said. "You need help."

"Help? Amy's getting help. Look at the good it's doing her."

"Fuck Amy! I'm not talking about her, I'm talking about you."

"All I need is some goddamn sleep. I just keep having the same stupid dream over and over again."

"See? You *need* to talk about it. I need you to talk about it. You're not sleeping; I'm not sleeping. *This* is making me crazy!"

I made an appointment to see the shrink.

But I went to BJ's instead.

Gail threw me out. Last Friday night. She just stood there with her arms crossed, chewing on her bottom lip.

"I think it would be best if you simply left," she said. *I think it would be best—Jesus Christ!*

She says she's tired of trying to get me to talk to her. I talk! Jesus, I talk! But she says it's all *inventory*, that I'm stuffing what's really happening inside. She says I have to see the shrink, that's the deal. She says she's been trying to get me to hear what she's been saying, but that I just don't seem to wanna listen. That I won't listen.

That's bullshit.

So we're separated.

More like *dislocated*. Except there's no Demerol, and there's no sudden relief like when the shoulder is put back in place.

I ditched the shrink again on Monday. I just couldn't do it.

Gail phoned. To give me shit—or that's what I thought.

I could hear her crying, though, but I didn't want to key in. "You didn't show up again today," she said. "The appointment was at fifteen hundred. We waited for over an hour. Why didn't you come? I even left you a message this morning to remind you. You know that's your last chance. You know that, don't you?" Then she started crying even harder, saying, "You can't come back. That was the deal—if you didn't see the staff psychiatrist, you couldn't come back. I don't want this, but I can't live with this shit of yours anymore." Then she paused. "Don't call me. Please."

She hung up.

Cece got transferred to Bravo Car when I got suspended for drinking while I was on standby Saturday night. I've been crashing at his place since Gail threw me out.

He called me Wednesday from the morgue.

The night before, Amy rented herself a buggy, drove it till the battery died, then lay down in the dust and opened up the auxiliary port on her suit. Let in the lunar night.

The next morning some kid in a sailplane spotted her.

Bravo Car got the call.

In my dream now, when the patient codes on me and I'm busy trying to defibrillate him, somebody raps on my visor.

I look up and there's this big window just hanging there against the stars and, through it, I see Amy.

At first I'm glad—but then I see that she's dead, that her face is fro-

zen. She starts pointing at me, at my suit, so I look down. The front of my suit is littered with small rips, and air vapor is gushing out of each tear.

I look back up at the window and I see her shaking her cute head at me and mouthing the words, "You dumb fuck," as she turns and walks away. •

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: STEVEN MILLS is an underemployed ambulance paramedic living in Appledale, British Columbia, only six minutes from downtown Winlaw, the center of the universe. This is his first sale.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: MARK SAVONA says: "With my base of operations still grounded firmly in the movie community known as Toronto, I am now entering my third year at the Ontario College of Art and Design, where I'm specializing in illustration. My plan this year: quit both my part-time jobs and do this for a living, knock on wood.

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Love with a mermaid

Sandra Kasturi

I have often wondered:

the scales in my bed
butterfly tri-coloured
coral reefs
of epic proportions
and salt residue
in the bathtub
the mussel shells
on the floor
my hair full of sand
from the pillowcase
webbed fingerprints
on the door-latch
and my copies
of *Moby Dick* and *Captains Courageous*
left slightly damp and half-read

But then,
I never thought love made any sense. 🍁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: SANDRA KASTURI admits nothing, blames everyone, and is bitter. She is a big fan of Jonathan Carroll.



Vow Tats

Steven Snair

Illustrated by Andrea Baeza

When the phone rang at 7:45 and it was old Mrs. Honacher and I've never got a call from her in my life and half asleep sitting on the side of my bed rubbing my eyes and trying to orient myself I saw Malcolm's cot unmade but the very same unmade that it had been left the day before—well, I knew something was up. I was no time getting down to the Corner-Copia, the lights from the freezers and pop cases glowing unearthly in the front windows in the fog's half dawn and Mrs. Honacher standing back to the cash register her head cocked and her glasses whited-out with reflections of the lights. Knowing her eyes were behind them looking for me made it different than ever before though I've been dropping in all hours since I was running age with change in my pockets.

Seems I was always having to find Malcolm and bring him home, like getting pulled out of class in grade three 'cause Malcolm was in grade one and his teacher let him go to the bathroom and he came back to class in his skidoo suit and nothing else on underneath and they couldn't find his clothes nowhere. Or the time he ran away from home 'cause he saw that episode of the *Partridge Family* where Danny thinks he's adopted 'cause he has red hair and he had red hair too, Malcolm did, so he thought he had to be adopted (though Dad also had red hair) and he took off from school during recess to find his real parents and Mom was gone two years then and Dad was out on the boat, couldn't be reached. Or even

now how many times did he go biking off and I'd get a phone call and have to go pick him up 'cause he got lost or tired or it got dark and him now twenty-seven years old.

Just Mrs. Honacher inside and Howard, the broom leaning against the lunch counter were he sat hunched over his coffee, shaking like it was a quick frost on Resurrection Day. Where's Malcolm? I asked.

He's gone, Mike, but you should find him, said Mrs. Honacher. He's not good. He's not right, Mike. I thought I'd better call you.

Shoulda called the police, said Howard. Boy's crazy. Crazy-headed.

Shut your mouth, Howard, said Mrs. Honacher, who let him sit for hours if he'd push the broom now and then (sees he had no place to go) but just 'cause he practically lived there no right getting familiar with the customers. Ain't fit, s'all, said Howard and took a sip of his coffee.

Your brother came in when I was just opening, bought a gun and holster set, you know, for kids. The Lone Ranger, got a mask and a star in the package. I didn't think nothing of it, thought he was getting a gift for a kid or something. So he goes outside and I'm putting the float in the register—I didn't even have my float out yet, Howard's putting on coffee when he came in. He comes back in through the door and he's got the mask on and he's grinning and I kinda laughed, you know, 'cause it was funny the crazy fool grinning with that tooth out and that red hair sticking up like it does like crab grass. And he pulls one of the guns out and he points it at me—I mean it's plastic, I know it's plastic, it's a cap gun

I just sold it to him so I know. But I got scared, you know, I'm wondering what's going through his fool head and he's still grinning but it's no joke. And he says, Gimme a pack of Marlboros, his voice right deep and serious. So I set a pack of Marlboros on the counter and he picked it up real slow like he had to be real careful, keeping me covered with the gun. He's got the holster on but it's too small, the belt's too small so he kind of has the ends tucked into his pants. Malcolm's putting the cigarettes in his jacket pocket and I glance over sideways and Howard's standing there like a damn fool with a coffee filter in one hand and the pot in the other and when I look back to Malcolm its like a spell came over him, like something melted in him for a minute and then like that it froze up quick and his gun arm straightened right out at me and blam! Well I near had a heart attack. And he was out the door and Howard was still standing there like a damn fool but the pot was smashed on the floor, he dropped it. And I saw Malcolm tearing off on his bike.

There ain't even caps in those packs, said Howard. Go look. He brought them caps with him. You know what that means, he said with his eyes all squeezed up. Pre-meditated.

I was kind of thrown by the whole thing. He doesn't even smoke, I said.

Maybe the Marlboro Man was holding his horse for him, said Howard and tried to take another pull on his coffee but couldn't stop grinning and had to set it down and sweep some to do something with that grin.

I first met J.K. Quick must have been about a month after that. Things had been hard for a bit but all the difficult

decisions had been made—doctors' hands now—and that's most what I felt. Relief. It was at that point in the treatments that I had to reintroduce myself to Malcolm every day anyhow, didn't know me from Adam West, so it didn't matter so much that I miss a day or two stopping into the hospital, he was a clean slate each time and I could catch it all up at the end, same difference. I had a business to run into the ground.

It was a slow day but one of my first regular days back in the shop. I had a few people in, walk-ins, looking at the flash designs on the walls. I did one piece, an ankle piece, a photo-realistic portrait of Einstein with a mushroom cloud rising from his pipe. It was time-consuming, took some thought to get it right, to allow for the distortion from the shape of ankle. She was a real bleeder, though. The girl I did it on—I mean, no girl now—but I babysat her once or twice and now she's on her last year of a physics degree. She was gone now and I was cleaning my equipment, sterilizing needles, and I heard the bells jingle but no mind most people need a couple minutes anyhow. As soon as I went out I knew he wasn't here for a tattoo, just didn't look the type, though he certainly was interested in the designs on the wall. He was dressed very sharp but rumpled, like the cut of his lapels or the fold of handkerchief meant everything in the world to him but then to hell with it and he slept in his clothes and carried on with business. And he wore a hat. Who wears a hat? He appeared to have the same tailor as the Joker, and the Spirit, and the Phantom Stranger.

So he totally ignored that I was there

and he was soaking in the flash, stopping at each piece, absorbing, staring at it for a period of time then um-hnh, barely audible, and he would blink, and turn to the next one. And there were some photos and he looked at them, too. I got to thinking, something that I heard at a tattoo convention down in the States the year before. There's this guy, they'd say in hushed in-the-know tones, he's been showing up at parlors all over the place. Some tat artists only catch a glimpse of the guy, to some he offers a comment—a criticism or bit of encouragement then disappears. But in some places he'll warm to a particular design and inquire about it, ask to see the customer, the finished work in the flesh. If the proprietor can produce the person, and if the tattoo meets some undisclosed criteria, this mystery man will produce a contract—a slice for the artist, a slice for the bearer of the tat, on the spot with the signatures and an obscene piece of money at that. The man, they say, is a dealer, and represents a collector, or collectors, unknown, and he deals in flesh—tattooed flesh—the way others might deal in oils or stamps. The grisly mechanics of the taking possession, the tanning, and framing of these pieces went unexplained, but only your undertaker know for sure and what the hell by that time what's a tat but embroidery on worm food? And it was always a friend of a friend, third person stuff—the regular urban legend profile—but it was a pretty widespread rumor and the tellers pretty sincere.

The Phantom Stranger turned all at once away from the pictures on the wall clasped his hands behind his back and looked down at his shoes. One

potato, two potato, he looked up at me, grinned a Bell's palsy grin, whipped off his hat and his hat was on the desk and he was settled in the client chair, slouched back with one leg crossed at the knee of the other. He pointed at my arms. Prison?

That was intended to be an insult, I thought, not about my character but about the quality of my tats. In a sense though he was right, content-wise they were hardly distinguishable from prison chic circa 1940—a medley of hearts, stars, crucifixes, horseshoes, pirate flags, daggers, eagles, panthers, praying hands, skulls, snakes, Indian maidens, hula girls, the Katzenjammer Kids, Felix the Cat, Mutt and Jeff, etc., etc., and the permanent necklace round my neck of all 52 playing cards not a heart or spade out of place. I pushed my wrist under his nose and pointed to the Sailor's Grave on my inner forearm, the billows in the sails so detailed a meteorologist could calculate the wind speed. Does this look like spit and shoe polish in a clam shell applied by hand with a safety pin? I asked.

He smiled and I could smell liquor off him. No, it's fine quality work, he said. Just a strange mix. Needles Parry?

No, I said. An apprentice of his, Liver Pill Lem—Lemmy Fitzgerald. This used to be his shop.

Descendants of Lew-the-Jew, he said. The old school, so old no one's attending class any more. You know what he did for a living before he picked up the needle? He designed wall paper. But you heard the story 'bout the two village barbers—the smart man goes to the one with the shittiest haircut, 'cause the other one

did the doo. Can't judge you by your gallery there, he said pointing to my arms.

He stood. Even this, he gestured to the designs on the walls, even this is less than I know you're capable of.

I do basic black, I said, some shading if it demands it. That's my thing. No apologies from me, doesn't fade like colors.

Proper thing, I'm not arguing, he said. Style, content—what about content? I don't see anything here like—what was that comic strip you did a couple years back?

Morgan's Planet.

That's it! Brilliant! A post-punk, neo-Dadaist Krazy Kat. R. Crumb and Beardsley on airplane glue, as pared down as Agent Orange on a Zen rock garden. The political sensitivity of Slim Pickens doing a promotions tour for Dr. Strangelove in Hiroshima.

Perhaps explaining, I said, the letter bombs that felled papers from its syndication like dominoes.

Keep it in mind, in the back, he said pointing to his hypothalamus. I'd like to see some finished work sometime, in that vein.

He prestidigitated a business card out of the air and pinned it to the desk with a forefinger. It was just a name, J.K. Quick. No address, no number, just Quick.

It was then that they caught his eye, a couple scraps of looseleaf on an easel in back. He circumnavigated the desk on the axle of his finger on business card and—ssshick—had the curtain pulled sheer left. He was sifting through the drawings, only five or six, but he kept flipping back, going through them again and again. Not

what I was talking about, he said, but very interesting. Abstract, intricate. These sketches almost display a will of their own, like the designs are evolving, becoming something, but are yet undifferentiated tissue. This, you do any of this work yet?

I shook my head, couldn't tell him that they were not mine.

Do some of this, he said, tats, and I believe we'll have some business to conduct. Make it well worth your while. Be nice not to have to deliver pizzas, yes? (That hit a well-greased shame-button.) J.K. Quick went to the door, turned as he put his hat on. Oh, and I've got a friend with the Wiggly's Gallery, he said, might be interested in your paintings. You still painting? Not my bag, but I'm sure I could convince him to take a look. After... You know.

And he was gone.

The sketches were Malcolm's. He had a vision, a series of visions really, as real to him as any vision seen by the saints even if they did contain characters from comic books. It was about two years ago they started and they were always more or less the same. Malcolm would be on a large hill with his bike high above everything and the grass up to his knees and the sky super bright and from far above would descend an angel and the air would be singing like a tuning fork. Some times the angel would be Linda Carter, as Wonder Woman. Sometimes it would be the Invisible Girl, but visible, from the Fantastic Four. Sometimes it would be Betty—though never Veronica. Sometimes it would be Blondie Dagwood, or Minnie Mouse, or Olive Oyl, though always incredibly beautiful in their own way but you wouldn't

know it from the comics said Malcolm, what they don't show. And they would hang before him, and the light would be streaming out in ripples from around them, and they would touch him gently under the chin and look in his eyes with infinite love and mercy and say, You are not alone Malcolm, She is looking for you. And then tears would well up in their eyes and they would unroll a scroll in front of him.

At first when he came out of the visions he was so overwhelmed by the whole thing that he couldn't remember anything about the scroll, though he knew it was a picture of some sort. He tried really hard to concentrate on the scroll and by doing this he could remember a part of it anyway each time and he would sketch it out until he thought he got that part right and he began piecing the parts together jigsaw-puzzle-like. He told me that he knew 'cause of the visions that his One True Love was out there in the world somewhere, looking for him, he believed that, my brother, and I guess I knew he was crazy of sorts long before I was told he was crazy of the holding-up-a-store-with-a-cap-gun-getting-worse-and-calls-for-radical-measures kind. So he's my brother and when he says it was destiny made me a tattoo artist for to put this vision-design of his on his back so his One True Love could see it know it's him, well, he's my brother, right?

Only there's this one part of it, a square patch in the upper corner, directly over his right shoulder blade, and he was having the damnedest time getting it straight. I don't know how many sketches he did, the ones that Quick was looking at were the closest

he got. He was getting nowhere but it always did take time, I'd been doing his back piece by piece for approximately two years now, but of course that was before they started applying the voltage to his head. The square above his shoulder blade remained un-inked, sticker missing from the face of a Rubik's cube.

It just made me sick thinking of him lying there, a lump, a groan, all the fuses blown. He had always been snappy, always peddling that bike, always weaving big plans. At six he wrapped wires around fridge magnets and convinced even me at sober eight that we could communicate at a distance with them. At seven he had found lost Indian caves beneath a tree uprooted in a storm, back behind the well box. At ten he was picking up garbage from all over, seen for weeks going with a sharpened litter stick and a red wagon stacked high, everyone thought him the Civic Kid till they found he'd been dumping it into the water supply trying to create a Swamp Thing. Pretty normal kid stuff, well not normal but not abnormal either. But at sixteen he was mixing breakfast cereals like a mad pharmacist after watching Kurt Russell in *The Strongest Boy In the World* and at eighteen when I was home from art college over Christmas he was explaining in a whisper in the dark as we lie in bed about how we could be superheroes when we grew up, like Batman and Daredevil because they didn't really have super powers but exercised a lot, and I guess that's the tell. Nothing changed with Malcolm, everything just changed around him without him. And now even more so. Dad dead and Malcolm

in the hospital and never coming home the same far as I could tell and the home to come home to hocked heavy to the bank and me delivering pizza to make the payments—a lot went into the decision I ended up making. And I thought, so much work already for what? Hours of needlework. See some profit from it, fix us up, and no cost really till no cost mattered.

I visited pretty regular so no one questioned anything, and lots of people carry briefcases, dropping in after work and so on. I had learned to be pretty portable working a bit on the road, doing the conventions and all, could fit it all in there, a double coil tat machine, couple needles, a portable power supply with foot switch, a bottle of black ink, some antiseptic, bandages. I spent some time with him first, reacquainted ourselves as best as could, tried to explain a bit and he was trusting as a pup. Did the work in the toilet, even with the echo the buzz of the needle wasn't enough to rouse his room mates or the attention of the nurses. Flies, Malcolm said, and I knew there was a glimmer of my brother in there. Flies. Years back he started stockpiling old pickle jars full of hand-caught Sea Monkeys to sell to his classmates. Caught them himself only they were mosquito larvae and in no time his Sea Monkeys had disappeared from his clothes closet, bottles of pond water sitting empty, and the guy who stole them must have really smelt, he figured, 'cause you should have seen the flies he left behind. You'll be home soon, I whispered to him over the hum of the needle. You'll be home soon... It turned out looking real authentic, as authentic a fit as possible one sane man

conjecturing last frame of a crazed brother's revelations. I'd projected best as could from the final sketches, a bit from each, worked it into context, what followed best with what was already laid down.

Turns out I'd gotten it pretty close. Was in the capital the other day, museum there having a retrospective of my work, even the toons and tat-flash as faded curio-footnotes, and after doing the requisite media interviews I had a chance to stroll through some of the local galleries, that sort of thing expected from visiting dignitaries. Some interesting work by this one woman, some of it real sophisticated but still folk-simple, thick layered abstracts with wide brush-strokes aching with

loneliness and unrequited love—but with a brightness, an unhip hope-brightness rarely seen, brazenly unchic, but that's probably why she was relegated to a frame-shop gallery. One beautiful piece, real familiar, a breath of déjà vu or a piece of home, nine pieces really, three by three, nine separate individual pieces but unmistakably together one piece. Its haunting beauty I believe rested in the upper right frame, it would have been a mediocre tableau otherwise, an abstract tapioca really, but this one frame broke set, both negated the others and subtly, in its contrast, transformed them—and in doing so it redeemed the entirety of the work. I declined to meet the artist. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: STEVEN SNAIR has published fiction, nonfiction, and poetry in *Fate*, *Venue*, *MaximumRockNRoll*, *The Pottersfield Portfolio*, *Carbon 14*, *Chaos International*, *Cyber-Psychos AOD*, and various other magazines, newspapers, and anthologies. At last count he had fifteen tattoos. At last count.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: ANDREA BAEZA has been working towards a happy medium between art for profit and art for art's sake. So far so good. You can usually find her tattooing at Ritualistics Body Modifications ... or going deaf at some gig.



Strange Harvest

Edward Willett

illustrated by Murray Lindsay

The tomato rolled across my coffee-spattered notes from the previous night's school board meeting and fetched up against my "I ♥ Saskatchewan!" cup with a "clink!" I stared at the fruit, then tapped it with the end of my pen.

Yes, definitely a "clink!"

I looked up at the elderly woman who had brought me this unsolicited gift, and winced—she wore a yellow and red floral-print dress under a man's bright blue nylon ski jacket. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Annaweis?"

"I want you to take a picture of my tomato and put it in the paper."

I had already guessed as much. As editor of the Drinkwell *Herald* (circulation 1,100) for three years, ever since I graduated from journalism school, I had seen enough four-pound potatoes, heart-shaped tomatoes, foot-long cucumbers and two-headed stalks of wheat to last any sane or insane man a lifetime. Every autumn these bizarre bits of vegetation were delivered in triumph to the *Herald* office by an unending procession of proud gardeners and farmers like Mrs. Annaweis, now glaring at me through her bifocals. I call it funny vegetable season, and here it was starting again—if in a bizarre manner. "Mrs. Annaweis, this is a lovely bit of ceramic, but..."

"Young man, it grew like that."

I bit my lip. Mrs. Annaweis' stern face defied disbelief. I opted for stalling. "Really?"

"Mr. Harkness, I am not crazy. I picked that tomato and a bushel more just like it from my garden this morning."

"Of course you did, Mrs. Annaweis," I said soothingly, while thinking sad

thoughts about senility. I played my ace in the hole. "It's just that I don't think it would photograph well, so..."

Mrs. Annaweis snatched up the tomato. "I'll prove it. Outside."

"What?"

"Outside!" She marched away with such authority I had no choice but to follow, shrugging at my bemused receptionist on the way out.

The lot adjacent to the *Herald's* ancient brick building was given over to Drinkwell Community Park, an acre of patchy grass and scraggly trees equipped with four red picnic tables, a single blackened barbecue and a rusting baseball backstop. "Watch," commanded Mrs. Annaweis, and tossed the tomato at the barbecue.

It exploded with a sound like a shotgun blast, spraying barbecue, tables and grass with blackened pulp. A cloud of greasy brown smoke mushroomed skyward.

I found I was holding Mrs. Annaweis' hand. "See?" she said smugly.

I released her. "Uh—yes, ma'am."

"Good. Get your camera."

"Yes, ma'am." Numb, I did as I was told, photographing Mrs. Annaweis standing with proprietary glee next to the mess on the grass. Then I went back inside and stared at the phone.

I had a contact at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Agriculture, but couldn't quite bring myself to call her. Somehow I didn't fancy telling a university professor someone had just brought me a fresh-picked hand grenade.

Finally I decided to run the story and photo without comment, like a UFO sighting or Phil Nutterworth's annual report of Bigfoot raiding his chicken

coop. "Freak mutation," I muttered as I typed it up. "Pollution. Toxic waste. Ozone depletion."

The next day was Wednesday, paper day, and as usual my morning was devoted to frantically laying out the last few pages while the pressman glared at me over folded, ink-blackened arms, and the advertising manager and his assistant sat at the coffee table and told jokes at my expense. In the afternoon I went home and went to bed. The tomato was momentarily forgotten.

But Thursday morning as I sat yawning at my desk, leafing gingerly through the paper in expectation of finding some horrible typographical error, the story caught my eye: "Local woman gets bang out of tomatoes." I chuckled.

I chuckled again when Art Kapusiany brought in the radishes—until he cut one open, and I had to waste a cup of coffee to douse my burning blotter.

And Art was only the first of half-a-dozen people stirred by Mrs. Annaweis' fleeting fame. Three more exploding tomatoes, two acid-filled cucumbers and a glow in the dark electric potato followed. The parade of peculiar produce was only ended by the onion someone tossed through the open window above my desk. It took us the rest of the afternoon to clear the gas out of the office, and my eyes were still bloodshot and burning when I drove home.

"It's gotta be a hoax," I muttered, then coughed, and restricted myself to silent black thoughts. Someone was trying to make me look like a fool—that had to be it. Maybe it was an elaborate attempt to discredit the newspaper.

But by whom? That town councilor

arrested for growing marijuana in his greenhouse? The used car dealer caught rolling back the odometers? Abigail Runne, irate because her last name was spelled "Runny" in her daughter's wedding write-up?

None of them seemed likely candidates for high-tech humor of this kind. But somebody was behind it, and I intended to find out who.

After gnawing a half-thawed TV dinner, I spread a map of the Rural Municipality of Drinkwell on my kitchen table and began marking the farms of the people who had brought me violent vegetables. A pattern emerged at once.

All six farms abutted on a seventh, belonging to a Nelson Roysum. "What did I ever do to you, Mr. Roysum?" I muttered, reaching for the phone.

"Hello?" said a voice creaky as a rusty gate.

"Mr. Nelson Roysum?"

"Yes?"

"This is Steven Harkness, the editor of the Drinkwell *Herald*."

"You don't say?"

"Mr. Roysum, we've had reports of some—um, strange vegetables grown by your neighbors. I was wondering if you've noticed anything."

"Strange vegetables?" Roysum sounded puzzled. "Well, no, but then, I don't keep a garden. Just my field crops."

I had a sudden vision of kernels of wheat popping like firecrackers. "Mr. Roysum, may I come out tomorrow and take a look around?"

"Well, sure, young man, if you like. Be my guest."

"Thank you, Mr. Roysum. I'll be out first thing."

That proved to be slightly imprecise, since to reach Roysum's farm I had to first follow one of the grid roads that crisscross Saskatchewan in geometric fashion, then find precisely the right turnoff, and finally keep the oil pan of my ten-year-old Toyota intact over ruts apparently made by the kind of pickups you see crushing cars on TV.

But at last I drove into Roysum's yard, which was surrounded on three sides by the ubiquitous poplar windbreaks of the prairies, in an advanced stage of autumnal yellowing. The old-fashioned farmhouse, tall and narrow, might have once been painted blue; behind it stood a sagging, weather-beaten barn, possibly painted red at the same time as the house. In the yard a thirty-five-year-old swather leaned for support against an even older tractor. Four slope-roofed sheds and three shabby granaries completed the farm assets. No one was in sight.

A knock on the door of the house brought no answer, nor did repeated calls of "Mr. Roysum! Mr. Roysum?" so I set off across the farmyard to see what evidence I could find that Roysum was involved in terrorist truck farming. After hearing his Will Geer voice on the phone, I no longer thought he had done it deliberately, but I still had some vague notion of an illegal dump of pesticide containers leaking mutagens into the water table.

I went first into the barn, permeated with the odor of dust, moldy grain, and old hay peculiar to its species. The sunlight streaming through holes in the old walls cast narrow beams of dancing motes through the darkness.

In one corner were a couple of horse stalls, sans horses. But something

moved, shuffling into the light from the doorway—and resolved into a bent old man in dirty overalls, the prerequisite baseball cap of the Saskatchewan farmer perched precariously on his grizzled head. He squinted at me. “Who are you?”

“Steven Harkness, from the Drinkwell *Herald*.” I held out my hand and he crushed my fingers for me. I revised my mental estimate of his frailty. “Nelson Roysum, I presume?”

“That’s right.”

“Mr. Roysum, are you all alone out here?”

“Never saw much use for a wife—”

“I mean, do you have any farm-hands?”

“Never saw much use for them, either. Been farming this land sixty years on my own. Why, you looking for work?”

I sighed. “No, Mr. Roysum. I’m the editor of the *Herald*, remember?”

“‘Course I remember. Ain’t lost my memory yet. Just thought you might be ready for a real job.” He guffawed, revealing yellowing teeth.

I managed a small smile. “Ha, ha.”

“Now, what was it you were looking for...?”

“Strange vegetables, Mr. Roysum.”

He squinted at me. “Are you sure you’re not looking for honest work, son?”

“Mr. Roysum—”

“Poke around all you like. Have fun. But you won’t find anything strange on this farm.” He shuffled out.

“I already have,” I muttered, and followed him. He disappeared into the house, while I continued my search, with depressingly consistent results—all negative. The sheds and granaries

were as innocent-looking and empty as the barn. A fruitless hour later I stood at the edge of the farmyard, beyond the windbreak, staring across the acres of ripe wheat that glowed in the morning sunshine like a quilt of pale gold, broken only by the winding, bush-lined path of a creek and the bump of a large haystack alongside it.

Roysum’s tractor had been on and off all through my search, as he tinkered with the engine. For the past few minutes it had been idling; now it died again, and in the sudden silence I could hear the cool wind whispering in the trees behind me and hissing, with a more high-pitched, urgent note, through the wheat. It was a beautiful, crisp, absolutely ordinary Saskatchewan autumn day.

I was about to turn away from the field when I glimpsed movement among the bushes along the creek. A deer? I thought, then saw it again. No deer, unless Mr. Roysum liked to spray-paint wildlife bright green. “Some green venison with your exploding tomatoes?” I muttered. Feeling like I’d wandered into a Dr. Seuss book, I set off toward the haystack, about half a mile away, aiming to intercept whatever-it-was.

The wheat was tall and strong, the best I’d seen in the region, though it had been dry all summer. Almost reaching my waist, it rustled normally as I pushed through it: no exploding heads, tear gas, fires, smoke, or electric shocks. But something was wrong, and it took me only a moment to realize what. There wasn’t a grasshopper in sight, though the splattered front of my car bore witness to their numbers elsewhere. *That’s it!* I thought, with the

smugness of every journalist who thinks he's solved a mystery. *Roysum has sprayed so heavily he's polluted his neighbors' land.*

Of course, that still didn't explain the green thing in the bushes, but I was confident my theory would have a place for it—once I knew what it was.

I was halfway to the haystack before it occurred to me to wonder why Roysum had one, when he had no cows or horses. I frowned, but only for a moment. I was on a roll. "Of course!" I said out loud. "He's using the hay to cover the pesticide containers!" Pleased with myself, I redoubled my pace. This could be big news. It might even bump the Saturday night bridge club results from their time-honored front-page spot.

Then the glowing potato whizzed by my ear and struck the ground behind me with a miniature thunderclap. I stared at the black, scorched wheat where it had landed and whipped around just in time to see a tomato heading for my head. Frantically I ducked, and it exploded nearby with enough force to knock me down. Red pulpy matter dripped from the back of my neck as I raised myself up. *I'm dying!* I thought; then, crazily, *blood really does look just like ketchup.* Then I saw the seeds in it. It was ketchup—or, more precisely, tomato paste. I scrambled to my feet, dazed but unhurt.

Both potato and tomato had been bigger than anything brought to the office. I wondered what kind of fertilizer Roysum used.

Another tomato soared overhead, but exploded harmlessly several yards away. This time I marked where it

came from—further up the creek, near the haystack—and dashed toward it, urging myself to remember Ernie Pyle.

My unseen assailant fortunately seemed to be short of both tomatoes and potatoes, but a barrage of round, white objects hurtled toward me, trailing blue smoke. Onions! I gulped air and held it—but there were too many of the vile vegetables. I had to breathe before I made it through the pall of gas, and dropped to my knees, coughing and choking, still twenty yards from the haystack.

Or rather, where the haystack had been.

Doubled over, gasping for breath, I saw through streaming eyes an enormous green oval, pulsing with light. From an irregular opening in the side, a tongue-like brown ramp extended, and up it scampered something the size and shape of a small Christmas tree: bright green, upright, with a dozen white, wriggling feet like animated roots and four upper limbs ending in splayed, twig-like fingers. A leafy canopy spread from its pointed top, and six glowing red circles on its body glared at me for a long moment before it ducked inside. Then the ramp disappeared with a wet, sucking sound, the opening closed, and the green oval blasted skyward in a whirlwind of loose hay.

And me? Well, I staggered back to the farmyard, bid an incoherent farewell to Roysum, somehow drove home without killing myself—and never told a soul until now. I have a journalistic reputation to maintain, after all, and the *Herald* is not the *National Enquirer*. As for the strange vegetables—people took them in stride, and wrote them off

like they did that substitute schoolteacher once seen dancing naked under the full moon to the music of the Four Tops, or the ghostly figure Eddie Macoun swears he saw flitting around the United Grain Growers elevator last July.

But now I know I can't keep quiet any longer.

Try this for an explanation: a wandering, intelligent being discovers Earth—a being which is not an animal, but a plant. What does it find here? A world where plants are completely subjugated to animals, that's what.

Being a green-blooded patriot, naturally it decides to help. It does a little genetic tampering, adding genes that code for an unstable compound here, an increased mineral content there. When it is discovered, it flees. The end.

But I kept asking myself, why

exploding tomatoes and electric potatoes? Why create what are essentially weapons when there's no one around to use them? And why didn't the creature do anything to Roysum's wheat?

Then last week I ran into him at the Co-op, and he told me he had the best harvest in all his 60 years, which, he said, was good news not only for him but for a lot of other people—because Roysum grows registered seed.

That means that next spring, hundreds of farmers across the prairie are going to be planting what grew in his field this summer.

When do you need weapons? When you have to outfit an army, of course.

I hope I'm wrong—but next year may be the funny vegetable season to end all funny vegetable seasons.

Watch your weekly newspaper. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: EDWARD WILLETT is a Regina writer who, as one-time editor of the weekly *Weyburn Review*, also saw enough goofy-looking vegetables "to last any sane or insane man a lifetime." His first novel, *Soulworm*, a YA fantasy set in Saskatchewan, was short-listed for a Saskatchewan Book Award in 1997; a second YA fantasy, *The Dark Unicorn*, will be out from Royal Fireworks Press this year. He also writes computer books and a weekly newspaper column on science, acts, and sings. "Strange Harvest" was originally published in 1987 in *Western People*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: MURRAY LINDSAY: Artist's Personal Log: While the freelance illustrating and graphic art business ricochets along in its unpredictable path, I snuck in my television debut as an extra on "*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*"—the TV Series. There is an episode involving a science fiction convention. I'm essentially playing myself at this fictional con, as I'm doing what many have seen me do at real cons: selling my buttons. It was a hoot.

After the flood

Sandra Kasturi

There are beasts in the towns
that have tumbled in a deluge from humans;
they have fallen from our sleeves
and even now peep out of our ears

I myself once had an antelope spring full grown
from a crack in my skull
and gallop away into the late morning

Several people have left camels on buses
and businessmen keep stirring up
crocodiles in their briefcases
or perhaps it's alligators:
they are never really sure until they are eaten

It has become increasingly tiresome
to discover sparrows by the thousands flying out of one's porridge
and African Pygmy Hedgehogs scrabbling in the bathtub
of course nearly everyone has had cows by now

We cannot seem to purge ourselves
of this inundation of large and small creatures
while there are fewer and fewer people on the streets

I even saw a leopard driving a car the other day
and the television will show nothing but "Wild Kingdom"

I don't know where the humans have gone
but I think there are still a few in the city;
they peer doelike from between curtains
and never answer the door. 🍁



Cleaner

Brent Hayward

illustrated by Ronn Sutton

Through the thin mail of his gloves, Bristle felt it again, that rhythmic thrum in the superstructure's steel: vibrations not from strong gusts of wind nor a distant storm's buffet; not from an oceanic tremor, either, come rumbling up the supports. Not from any force Bristle had encountered before in his life spent hanging under the bridge. He lay on his back in the webbing and pressed his hand gently upwards against the girder. Beyond it, the sky was clear and pale blue. Bristle spread his fingers slowly, entranced, and licked his dry lips.

Somewhere near his feet, Scrub grunted a warning: *Back to work!*

The harness supporting Bristle squeaked as he withdrew his hand. Clips of his tethers jangled; Bristle rocked. Like the other times, no one else in the crew had said anything about the strange vibrations. Bristle cleared his throat, decided he too would keep quiet; he had grown increasingly certain only he could feel the trembling, some sort of message only for him that he had not yet decoded, unpleasant news from far away. When it had first happened, he had asked eagerly of the others, stopping in his work; they had stared back at him with frowns on their creased faces, their eyes half-shut, as if gauging his sanity. He had even considered that he might be the source of the vibrations, that they spread outwards from him, manifestations of his yearning and solitude.

He retrieved the scraper from his chest, where he had laid it moments before, and clenched it tight in the same gloved hand he had felt the vibrations with. When he tilted his head back, the world went upside-down. Great blisters of paint and flaked rust on the underside of the girder moved into his line of sight; buboes on the superstructure, waiting to be cleaned. The bridge narrowed, diminishing to a point on the horizon impossibly tiny and infinite, lifetimes away. The sky there met the gray sea and blended. Bristle blinked away sweat and adjusted his goggles.

Where his hand had been, the steel was already clean from his afternoon's work. It gleamed dully at him, fruit of his labor. Bristle scraped at the blistered part with his spatula, saw the flakes break off to fall past him, towards the ocean far below.

In the end, he thought bitterly, everything falls into the ocean.

It was four days ago that he had first felt the strange tremble in the superstructure, at shift's end, as the crew prepared to pull the nest westward. The sky was clouded over; the air greenish, humid. Close and smelling of rain that did not come that night. One hand on the guy rope, the other braced against a strut, Bristle readied himself, moved forward in the netting—

And a reddish light burst in his peripheral vision, as if he had poked his head through a briefly glimmering barrier. The vibrations started then, he felt them in his arm, but it was the red light that worried him the most. He could find no source for it; it was not repeated.

Soon the vibrations diverted his attention, and captured it.

When storms raged out of sight, somewhere either far behind the nest—howling over and around stretches of the bridge cleaned last year, a generation ago, perhaps even by long-dead ancestors—or far ahead of it—blowing and raining on steel the crew might never reach in Bristle's life, or perhaps, if the storms struck closer, haul themselves under just next season—the vibrations were faint and random. Of course, when a storm hit much closer, or screamed through the segment of bridge from which Bristle

and the others hung, making them miserable, the ensuing shakes and vibrations were no great mystery.

Sometimes wind made the girders sing.

Everybody in the nest knew the varieties. Everybody shared them. But not this pattern. Off and on over the past four days, these vibrations held a rhythm like Bristle's own heartbeat, a pace regular and steady, as if counting off his remaining time.

Throughout the waning shift, Bristle cleaned, and he scraped, and he tried to lose himself in work. But his thoughts were haunted.

Overall, the day had been a still one. Peaceful, it seemed, for the rest of the crew. He had heard few curses as they worked in the nest behind him.

Curious white birds wheeled on thermals overhead. And Scrub, supervising from his harness slung lowest in the webbing, also watched silently. Bristle could not see Scrub unless he twisted around, but he felt Scrub's stare boring into his back and he knew the boss suspected him of shirking.

Or of losing his mind.

Bristle worked steadily. He did not twist to see Scrub. His mind raced with memories he was helpless to stop, as if they had been triggered by the flash of red light and the throbbing pulse in the steel. Now he was remembering a day when, as a child, he had asked the simple question: *Why?* Even then, endless water below and superstructure above, endless sky and storms and scrubbing this bridge inexorably westward, had seemed without reason.

The answer was a smart pinch on young Bristle's cheek, and a terse

lecture...

Bristle scraped with all his might, as if he could clean more than just the girder. His arms ached. Chips flew.

The lecturer, a gaunt man called Elbowgrease, had died long ago, his body tumbled from the nest down into the ocean. Bristle had since aged, and was moved to the front, and understood now what the dead man had meant:

We clean because our parents did, and because their parents before them did. We clean because there is nothing else in life except this bridge and the horizon that creeps away from us as slowly as we approach it.

When Scrub blew a shrill note over two fingers, Bristle sighed and rolled over in his harness to look down through the thongs of webbing at the ocean. Wind whipped whitecaps far below into frothing green. *If, he thought, his mind still racing, a child were to ask me the same question today that I asked as a youth, I'd reach out and pinch the earnest cheek, mutter the same platitudes.*

But that wasn't very likely.

There are no children—

Creaking and grunting and jangling, Scrub climbed the mesh of the nest. The netting around Bristle tugged, pinching him, and now he did twist; sunlight played over Scrub's scarred face, glinted off his goggles and worn-leather helmet as Scrub hauled himself hand over hand. Behind him, below him, as far as Bristle could see, the ocean churned.

"Free dangler," Scrub said angrily. "What's with you? Keep your mind on your work. You're having a bad week."

"I'm no dangler," Bristle answered.

He reached calmly into his hip pocket and drew out a flask, opened it, and gulped a swallow of warm egg yolk. Some cleaners had gone crazy in the past, leaving the nest to dangle and never return. It was something that a supervisor was always on the watch for. But Bristle knew he was not crazy. He said, "I was just thinking."

"Well, I do the thinking on work time," Scrub grumbled, rubbing at his beard with the back of a glove and staring hard at Bristle. His dark eyes glittered. "You know your job, man. I want to reach the next support in five days, at most, and if you lie there just stroking the damn steel, we won't get anywhere."

"I'm not a dangler," Bristle repeated, and, after a moment, turned away. "This is my break."

Scrub came no closer. "I'll move you to the back, you know. Don't think I won't." When Bristle did not respond, Scrub retreated, mumbling, to his low-slung spot.

In the rear of the nest, oblivious to the tension up front, one of the twins began to sing a plaintive song. For the rest of his break, Bristle listened to the lilting sound, his eyes closed, lost in a haze of memories.

Bristle worked and watched evening clouds blow in across the darkening sky. They mingled in slow turmoil above him. He thought, *I have not touched another person in many spans of the bridge, maybe even a dozen*, and nearly stopped scraping again. He found himself wondering: if it were his own body's loneliness that sent out the signals, who would ever receive them?

"Ready to heave!" Scrub shouted,

startling Bristle from his reverie. He grabbed the guy rope he had fastened that morning, braced his body against a girder, and—on the count of three—pulled until his arms shook. Sweat coursed his face. Behind him, others in the crew also pulled and groaned as one. The entire nest lurched loudly on its pulleys, grinding several inches westward before settling. Swaying forwards and back—while everything around him rattled and clacked and flakes of old paint fell into the ocean—Bristle watched the steel wheels roll to a grinding stop on the lip of the girder he had just scraped clean. Above his face now, more of the bridge had moved into range: a day's more blisters to remove from the steel, a day's more rust to prize free.

It'll be a week, he thought, before the twins look up from their spot in the back and see this, cleaned and ready for their brushes. Slowly but surely, pull to the west, until water claims us and puts us to rest.

So the cleaner's motto went.

Night closed in on the nest abruptly. It always did. The crew gathered together, like giant spiders moving towards the hub, spinnerets trailing cord. They did not speak much, but hung cloistered in the webbing as the winds picked up. Crouching upright, but remaining apart from them, still at the front of the nest, Bristle turned to look toward the setting sun. His chin rested on one knee. The girders glowed like lightning; the ocean was momentarily becalmed with a vermilion sheen. Ahead, the support Scrub aimed for was not that far off, rising solemnly from the sea. They would arrive there

in three or four days; Scrub was always melodramatic.

The perspective of other bridge supports made them appear shorter and shorter in the distance until Bristle could no longer see them. But he knew they were there. Each one was a resting spot, a week-end, a place to collect food—egg yolk and scrawny mice nesting under the bridge, and spiders much smaller than the ones he imagined the rest of the crew looking like. Each support was a passage of time. Each support an increment on the span.

Maybe at the next one, Bristle thought, I'll touch someone again.

Glancing back to see the faces of his crew, awash with blood-colored highlights, he tried to imagine who might let him come close but, doing so, felt suddenly tired. More tired than he had felt in a long time. Closing his eyes, he was asleep in a second, and promptly began to dream:

He lay in his harness under the bridge. But he had shucked his leathers, taken off his boots and his gloves and his goggles, disconnected his tethers. Nightwind blew across his naked body.

On *top* of the bridge, where the white birds landed and fought and then flew from the nest's advance, where rain hit first when it rained and sun beat hot on other days, stood a woman. At first Bristle did not recognize her as such: her body was unencumbered by cords and gadgets, by grime and calluses, but to see her there, upright, without anything to assist her posture, was astounding. And when she moved—the woman came closer to where he lay looking up, paused al-

most directly over him—she lifted one strong, tawny leg and placed it down, then lifted the other, staying erect the whole time. *With no webbing!*

There was a maneuver that a cleaner used to get from one part of the nest to another, in an emergency—it consumed much energy. Unclip all tethers, haul head-upward on the net, most weight on the hooked fingers but some on the legs. This was *standing*. Then, combining arm strength and pushing off with alternating feet, short distances could be covered quickly before exhausted limbs tangled together or gravity took its toll. This part was called *walking*. Bristle thought of it now; it was the closest he could come to understanding the woman's quiet movements.

And then again, it did not even approach a description of her grace.

Bristle sighed. Although dwarfed by the rising scaffolds, the apparition seemed so tall to him; a vertical woman, a beautiful, unfettered, miracle woman.

He wanted her to come and lie with him in the harness, wanted her to whisper to him, to sleep in his arms.

Or better still, to be up there with her!

But when he called out she did not look down. Instead—in her floating, upright fashion—she moved over to the edge of the platform and leaned against a rail there. She looked out to sea. Then east, where the nest had come from.

"You're around here somewhere," she said softly, her voice alluring, like the sound the ocean sometimes made, when Bristle wished that he could just fall into it and never work or wake up

again. It seemed to come from somewhere inside his own head, between his eyes, maybe, or from the air all around. "I can't pinpoint you, though: nothing else is working here." She paused, and smiled sadly. "In four days you traveled *three meters*. So slow. The whole process should've taken seconds." The woman tossed her head now; the image of her body seemed to waver, then solidify again. "But you *should* be right around here, whatever you are. If you can hear me, I'll repeat what I've been trying to tell you for several days now: you have breached the two-hundred kilometer exclusion zone and are presently considered a threat to security. Any further advance west will be considered an act of aggression. Measures will be taken. Turn around. Go back."

Though she made little sense to Bristle, the woman's speech caused him to long for her all the more. If only she could turn that sad smile upon him! He watched the wind blow hair from her shoulders as she lifted her face to the night and closed her eyes. What would it be like to be free of leathers forever, to move independent of this netting?

To be forever with a woman like *that*?

She turned away from him.

And vanished.

Bristle awoke.

Clustered in the center of the nest, the others slept. It was night now, but Bristle was no longer tired. Everything seemed clear to him. Outlines of shadows were sharp, precise. Moonlight on the girders. A light mist chilled his cheeks. The woman seemed to be a piece that was missing from Bristle,

something he had wanted his whole life without knowing. He pulled at his woven corset, squirmed and tugged hard at his binding. With one hand, he snapped the cord of his scraper and then let the tool fall. It was swallowed quickly by the night. Below was noise, shapes of glimmers on the waves, darkness.

Scrub would never forgive him now. He would certainly be punished, moved back in the nest, relegated to fermenting birdshit for cocktails or painting the bridge with paintless brushes that had lost their hairs long ago...

Bristle untethered his limbs from the net and climbed forward. Where the nest rose to meet the bridge in a bundle of thick cord and a well-greased old pulley, he hooked one arm around a girder, then the other, and pulled himself up. The topside of the strut was just wide enough for his body. He kicked his legs, and lay there, balancing, feeling the steel against his chest, his chin. Exertion had made his head spin.

And there were the vibrations again, matching his heartbeat.

Looking up through the lattice of the superstructure, he caught a glimpse of the crescent moon watching, and the darker shapes of clouds blowing in.

Dangler, he thought. *You are a free dangler.*

But, after catching his breath, he pushed on, wriggling forward until he came to an angled girder that led from the distant support past his face, up past another horizontal strut, to the platform where he had seen the dream-woman standing. Another girder crossed it in a giant X. In case his waning energy gave out altogether, Bristle reached out to

wrap one of his wrist tethers around the steel, securing it tightly just above the head of a large rivet. Uncleaned, the superstructure here was crusted with the dirt of ages; it broke off in dusty flakes. Bristle pulled his upper body along the angled girder, getting higher with each grunt, each tug, so that he was soon lying at forty-five degrees. The toes of his boots just touched the beam from which the nest was suspended. He was higher in the world than he had ever been before.

Far below him, wind slapped through the ocean swells.

He wound his free wrist tether further up the angled girder, leaving enough slack for him to loosen the first. Soon he could grip the next horizontal strut; he heaved himself onto it, managed to get his chest and hips and boots up. Breathing in air was like breathing in fire. His body trembling, he looked back.

The nest was a mass of shadow; the crew a clump of darker, unstimulating shapes, further away and smaller than Bristle had thought was possible. He was already halfway to the next bridge support. Disconnecting his wrist tethers altogether, Bristle left them behind and scaled the last stretch of the angled girder, clenching it tight with both arms. Finally he hooked his left forearm over the lattice-work platform. For an instant, as he tried to get up this last stretch, his legs swung out over nothing. His fingers clenched the bridge so tightly, it felt as if the mail of his gloves pushed down to their bones. Gasping, he heaved. And rolled.

He lay on his back on the platform, breathing hard and staring up at the purpled sky. For the first time in his life,

there was nothing between it and Bristle: no beams, no girders. No super-structure. He tore his helmet off and closed his eyes until the dizziness faded.

There was no going back to the nest now. Without his tethers, the logistics of going down were unthinkable.

And without his spatula, he was useless.

He was truly a dangler. A bad egg.

Bristle struggled to his hands and knees. Through the grid of the platform he could see glimmers of moonlight on water. He swayed with vertigo. Ahead of him, to the west, the bridge went on forever, darker than the sky. He looked over his shoulder; behind him was the same view, but without the crescent moon. The eternal bridge. Bristle wondered if it really did go on forever, as some said, and doubled back on itself. A massive, never-ending loop.

Well, he was free of cleaning it now. Free, he thought, with a bitter trace of self-recrimination, to chase some phantom.

Bristle tried to get to his feet. He managed to squat for some time, with his hands held out to either side, but he soon tumbled over. His legs would not respond to his wishes, or hold his weight. And the bridge was too sturdy. The lack of motion made him feel ill. Slowly, woozy, he began to crawl westward.

Before long (but easily several days' journey for the nest; he was almost over the support, where the scaffolding on either side rose to incredible peaks), he heard a commotion beneath the bridge: Scrub's shout, the nest rustling. The crew was awake, looking for him. Bristle froze. But could the others see

him here, so far above, just a dark shape on the mysterious upper surface? They probably would not even think to look up. Scrub would decide that the ocean had claimed Bristle's body, that Bristle had fallen while trying to dangle free. There would be a crew meeting first thing in the morning, a talk on the dangers of spending too much time thinking or staying apart from the rest of the cleaners. Bristle could almost hear it now.

He resumed his painful crawl.

The platform of the bridge was not as different from the underside as Bristle had imagined it to be; it was steel, in filthy condition, pale with mottled birdshit. Welded and riveted, all sharp angles and interlocking framework. But gravity pushed down on him here. The world was reversed. He no longer swung from a soft web; his bones and muscles ached. His knees would burst apart if he kept this up for too long. His bones would shatter. Could he wriggle forward, on his back?

The misty wind carried to him Scrub's voice: "Ey, Bristle? Briiiiistle..?"

And where, he thought, looking into the distance, *are you going to go?*

"Briiiiistle?"

He saw the sheet of light too late to pull back; one instant it was not there, then, when he moved his head slightly, it erupted, a red blazing curtain. Bristle collapsed, moaning, on the platform. When he blinked away afterimages, the woman was back, standing not two meters away, looking down at him.

"Who are you?" she whispered. Her eyes widened; one foot moved backwards. "You're a ... man?"

Bristle uncurled himself, teeth clenched. "Yes," he managed to say.

Pushing his torso off the bridge with both trembling arms, he could look up at the woman's face, return her gaze. He saw the shape of the moon shining through her body. "My name is Bristle."

A beam of hazy white light stretched from far out to sea, from one side of the bridge and many lifetimes west, onto the woman's back. Her robe blew in the wind, though right now there was no wind Bristle could feel. When she did not answer, he said, "I'm a cleaner."

The woman made a small, gasping sound; she put one hand to her mouth. "You talk so strangely. But I can understand you. You said ... you're a cleaner?"

Bristle nodded.

"That's funny. I'm a cleaner, too." She looked beyond Bristle, to the east. Her eyes seemed sadder than anything he could ever imagine.

"You? A cleaner? But you're so ... so beautiful."

"I just don't see how any of this can be happening," the woman whispered. "I was woken up to investigate, but nobody else seems to be around to answer my questions or hear my report. I don't know what to do." She returned her gaze to Bristle. "Surely," she said, "you haven't crawled all this way?"

"No," Bristle answered.

"You weren't here last night. I looked."

"I was ... under the bridge." But he was thinking: *That was in a dream. I'm not dreaming now.* "What is your name?" Bristle lowered his torso again and rolled onto his back. Though the steel was much harder than the netting

had been, he felt more comfortable like this. He looked at the woman upside-down, at her pale, sad face, at the sickle moon showing through her chest.

The woman watched him, and frowned. "I don't remember my real name," she said. "But I'm part of a system called IDEBCATS. At least I was. It's an acronym. You can call me Deb."

Though Bristle still did not know what the woman was talking about, just hearing her voice was enough to make his heart thud. So poised and smooth-skinned, it was as if Deb was not even the same animal that he and the others in the nest were. Women and men he knew were seldom a comfort to him. They were tough and, in the rare times that they touched him, they creaked in their layers of leather and hide and woven debris, their skin dry and cracked and scabby. "I came up here," he said, "to be with you."

She smiled wistfully. "I've tried to contact you several ways: beating out Morse, hypnopaedic mist—"

Under the bridge, Scrub yelled again—maybe they *had* seen him up here, or seen the beam of light that shone from far away onto Deb. Bristle opened his mouth to explain about the nest, but the woman had moved quickly to the railing and stood there, looking down. "Are there more of you under there? A commando attack?" Her voice sounded angry now, and when she turned back to Bristle, her face was creased. The beam behind her danced, flickered, following her motions. "It that it? While you distract me they sneak past? Invading!" Her voice became louder and louder, shrill. "Well, we've got a fix now, Bristle! A

lock on them!"

"Just cleaners," Bristle said, alarmed at the change in the woman's demeanor. "Just other cleaners."

"I couldn't figure it out. But you were tricking me."

"No no no."

She stared for a long time, as if listening to a voice Bristle could not hear. Then her lower lip—that impossibly red, soft, full lip—began to tremble. "Oh, I don't know, Bristle. They left me all alone back there. I don't know what to do in this case. I don't want to kill anyone."

"Kill?" Bristle was shocked. Was this woman a *dangler*? This woman of light and wind who came to visit him in and out of his dreams: was *she* crazy? "Why would you kill us?"

"It's my job," Deb said. "That's what I do." There was pride in her voice. "Interactive distant early bridge cleansing and termination. That's my duty."

"Maybe—"

Scrub shouted once more.

Bristle licked his lips; it occurred to him now that the beam was like a tether on Deb, that she was not as free and beautiful as he had at first imagined. "Maybe," he said quietly, "you don't have to do your job anymore."

It seemed as though Deb had not heard him. She returned from the railing to stand by his head. "I'm isolated, Bristle. Cut off from everything."

"Me too," Bristle said, and he reached up to touch the woman but his fingers passed through her leg.

She said suddenly, "Will you come back with me? Stay with me, Bristle?" Pointing westward. "Just a few meters away, the moving walkway starts. You'll be at the terminal before you

know it."

Thinking that nothing was ever what it seemed, Bristle said, "Don't kill my crew." Inside his chest, there was a chasm of disappointment opening, a hollowness. The wind blew tears from his eyes.

Deb stared at him. "If you don't come with me, I'm afraid another part of the system will kill you. The laser has just become active. It's got a lock on your position. I don't think I can stop it."

"I don't want anyone—"

The beam of light winked out and the woman was gone again, suddenly, leaving only Bristle and the moon, and the shouts of his name coming up from the dark nest below.

He called through the grille of the platform for a long time, trying to explain to Scrub that he felt the crew was in grave danger. Scrub yelled back that it was he, Bristle, who was in trouble, and that he had better get his ass back down into the nest. He called Bristle all sorts of names, made threats, screamed until his voice went hoarse.

"We saw you up there, talking to no one!" Scrub said. "Man, you've lost your mind! And you've lost your position!"

As Bristle wearily crawled westward, Scrub's shouts faded.

When his energy was spent, he lay on his back near the railing, and was surprised to find the platform moving slowly under him, bearing him along. He was too tired to be alarmed. He watched the night sky above him and thought about the people he had left behind, people he would likely never see again, and wondered if the whole

thing had been a mistake. Maybe Scrub was right. Maybe he was crazy.

Eventually, he fell asleep.

The distant *crump* of an explosion woke him. It was raining, a misty dawn. The sky was gray and uniform. He was still being delivered westward by the moving platform. He propped himself up on his elbows and saw darker smoke rising from the bridge far to the east, a smudge that struggled to get into the air. Was the crew dead? Had he been responsible for the nest's destruction? Feeling a surge of guilt, Bristle opened his mouth and let drops of rain wet his tongue, his throat. He took a swig of egg yolk from his flask. His hands shook.

A white bird cried out nearby as he began to unfasten his leathers, complaining about Bristle exposing his flesh. Tossing his woven corset aside, and his leggings, so that they were quickly left behind on the stationary part of the platform, he wondered if he would ever see another person, or if he had already passed from the world of the living. But the rain felt good on his skin. He rubbed his hands idly over his chest and belly and face, felt the grime there softening, and knew

he was still alive.

The vibrations in the bridge began once more, up through his spine, and he felt a shiver of remorse. *Free dangler*, he thought. *This is what happens to those who go bad*. His heart pounded strongly.

When there was a brief clearing in the cloud cover, and a glimmer of sun showed through, he was sure he saw Deb again, running on the bridge next to him. This time her tether of light came from the sky. She was faint, though, hardly more than a phantom in the golden mist. Her mouth worked silently. He got the impression she was trying to apologize for something. Her faint hands waved at him, but her expression seemed charged with elements of hope and excitement...

She could not exist. Bristle had imagined her into being. The rain clouds closed in and Deb was gone.

Some time later, when Bristle rolled onto his side, curling in on himself and tilting his head so he could look west into the rapidly approaching future, he saw a dark line along the horizon that took his breath away: a smear of something solid slowly widening as he stared. Not sky, not bridge, not the restless swell of the ocean. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: BRENT HAYWARD lives in Toronto, where he is currently finishing a novel. "Cleaner" is his third story in *On Spec*.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: RONN SUTTON continues to draw Elvira, Mistress of the Dark ("Horror hostess with the mostess") as well as Draculina, Spinnerette and others for various American comic book companies. He resides in Ottawa, Ontario with writer/artist Janet L. Hetherington.

ASK MR. SCIENCE!

Mr. MC of Sydney, BC, asks:

Q : What are the Nobel Prizes?

A : The Nobel Prizes are to science what the Academy Awards are to the movies. They are awarded in various categories, such as "Best Male Scientist," "Best Female Scientist," "Best Scientist in a Supporting Role," "Maddest Scientist," "Best Foreign Scientist," "Most Expensive Government Project," "Most Destructive Military Scientific Development," and so on. The 1983 Nobel Peace and Quiet Prize was awarded to the Sony Corporation of Japan for the invention of the Walkman.

Mr. SC of Burnaby, BC, asks:

Q : What are cosmic rays?

A : Cosmic rays are distant relatives of the Manta Ray, and swim in the great sea between the stars. Although immense by terrestrial standards, they are curious and gentle creatures, and have brought harm to no one. They are very tenuously constructed, however, and when they accidentally fall into the earth's atmosphere, they shrink tremendously in size until they can only be detected by cloud chambers or other sophisticated apparatus. They are killed, of course, when they strike the ground at high speed, and it is feared that this species will someday become extinct.

Mr. GD of Burnaby, BC, asks:

Q : Why does sound not travel through a vacuum?

A : This is actually just another old wives' tale. Sound does indeed travel through a vacuum, but cannot pass through the boundary between the vacuum and the air. The very large difference in Index of Acoustical Refraction of vacuum and air causes the sound to be totally reflected at the interface, and hence it appears, falsely, that sound will not traverse a vacuum. Indeed, to those creatures that live in a vacuum, it appears, for the same reason, that sound cannot travel through air.

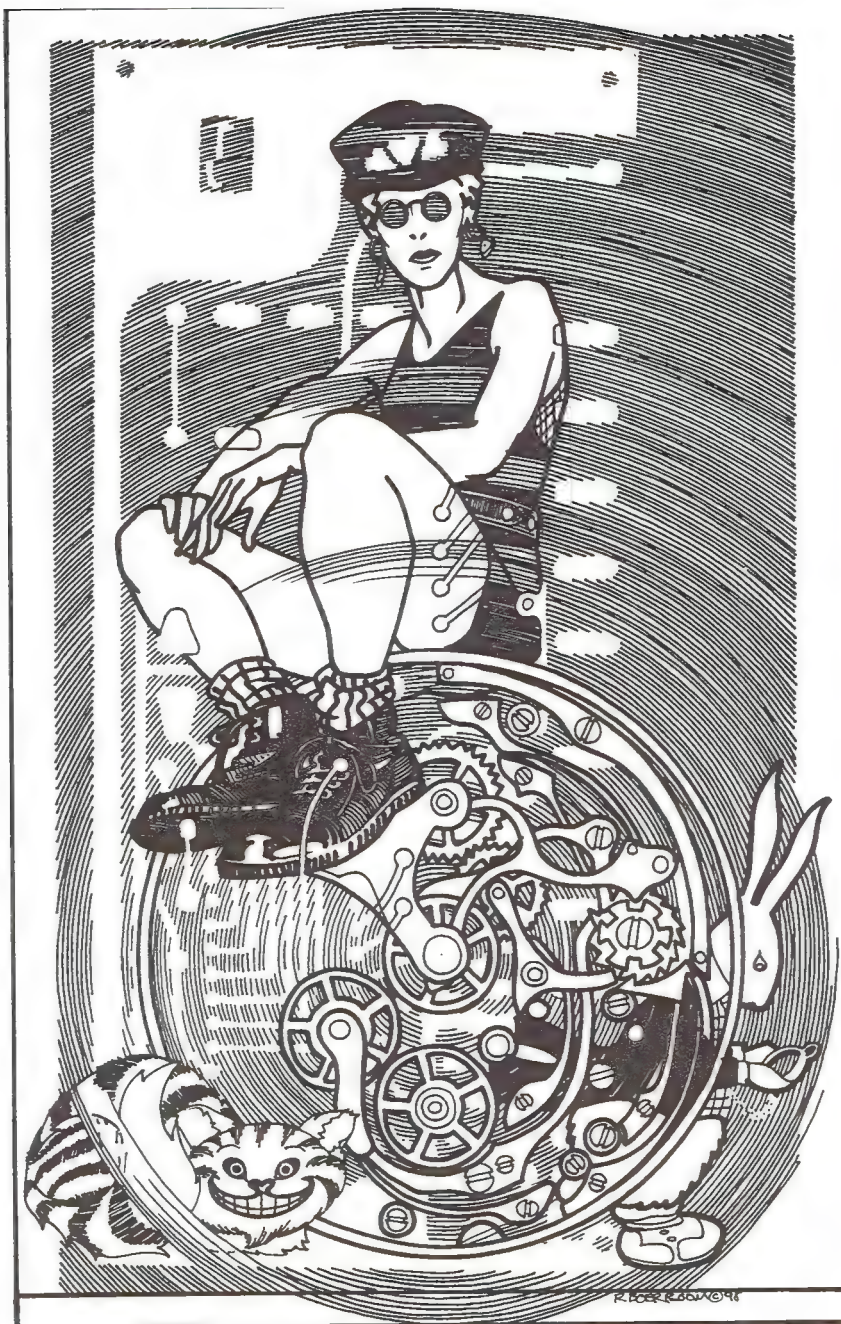
Send your questions to:

Ask Mr. Science!

c/o *On Spec*,

Box 4727,

Edmonton AB T6E 5G6.



The Number Before Infinity

Tracy Kenderdine
illustrated by Robert Boerboom

All of Ellie's childhood had consisted of questions. "Dad, why doesn't water have a smell?" "Why can't we see the wind?" "Do mountains grow like trees?" and the most obtuse of all, "Dad, what's the number just before infinity?"

Nights sometimes he'd lay awake and wish, ashamed, that Ellie would grow up to be a ballerina or a veterinarian, or one of those skinny girls with thin hair who worked in convenience stores or donut shops, the ones he always saw clustered in the parking lot wearing tight faded jeans and blue eyeshadow and smoking cigarettes, their thick voices and bad grammar and gratuitous use of the word "fuck" belying any impression of thoughts any higher or wider than the feasibility of body-piercing or the plot twist of last night's soap-opera. Girls named Tiffany and Brittany and Ashley—names of dishes, not people. Anything but someone who wasted her life chasing the answers to questions that no one knew how to ask yet.

She always wanted him to tell her riddles, not so much because she had such a terrific sense of humor—she didn't—but because she liked trying to figure them out. One day he asked her, "What's got four legs, two wings, and barks?"

She thought about it for a long time. Finally, she gave up.

"A dog."

She frowned. She said, "Dad, dogs don't have wings."

"Oh, I just put that in to make it more difficult."

For a few moments he thought she didn't get it, and was disappointed. But the next second she burst out into ecstatic, almost violent laughter. "Oh, Dad, that's wicked!" She was nine.

At some point, very early, she somehow learned to read. He never knew how it had happened—one night, coming in late to replace the blankets that were always fitfully flung from her, he found *Alice in Wonderland* open on her chest, one sleeping hand still clutching the book. It crossed his mind occasionally as she grew older that perhaps he ought to monitor what she read, but it seemed ridiculous and punitive, like going through someone's garbage to count empty scotch bottles. She read the most fantastic things—Borges, and Beckett, and some bizarre book of Estonian folk tales, of all things, that had appeared in the basement one day. He had never seen it before, through four moves, but Ellie had conjured it up from somewhere. Estonian fairy tales full of gods and magicians and talking eagles with names like Vanapagan and Kiisike and Vanaisa. One day he had opened it to see Laura's name on the flyleaf. The laborious child-adult script—controlled exuberance; concentrated, enforced, tongue-out-of-the-side-of-the-mouth neatness. "This book belongs to Laura Marx." On the inner pages he found Simon's adolescent territory markers: "Pooh-pooh head was here." "Laura is a wiener." "This is a stupid book." Laura's brother was still recognizable in the scrawls. It had startled him, perhaps more than it should have, to think that some of Ellie's magic had come from this.

One day, when she was twelve, she had come to him to relate the plot of a story she had read. It was about a man who had built a time machine, and tested it by travelling a week into the future. But upon arrival, he had found an empty town—no people, no ani-

mals, no living things. He had searched everywhere, terror mounting, but nothing.

"And you know what, Dad? You know what happened? You know what it was?"

No. What?

"He was so excited—he was in such a hurry—he forgot that it was June 24—he set the machine to June 31—and there is no June 31! He went to a day that didn't exist! That's why there was nobody there! Isn't that creepy? Isn't that cool?"

Two days later she had come to him, looking thoughtful, wearing her serious face. "Dad," she said. "Do you remember the story I read? The one about the guy who went to June 31?"

Sure. Sure he did.

"Well, if there was no June 31, then why was there a town there? Why didn't he just come out of the machine and find nothing?"

"Honey, I don't know. I don't know."

"How come you can have a place exist when the day doesn't? Where was he if he wasn't in the future? If there was no June 31, then how come the machine went there, if it wasn't the future?"

Jesus, what had she wanted from him? He was a lawyer, not God.

"I don't get it, Dad. It doesn't seem like that's what ought to happen."

"Honey, it's a story. It's something someone made up. That doesn't mean that it has to be real."

"Well." She had the air of someone who had been gravely insulted. "Well. I don't know. It sounds like it should be real. But I don't see how it can be. I'll have to think about it."

Just like that—just as if she were

forty and buying a new car. *I'll have to think about it.* As if it were a yes-or-no proposition, something that was resolvable after a weekend's consideration and a look at your bank balance. Ellie, however, seemed to see it as just that.

That was where it had begun—the terrible disappointment with the world, with its sloppiness and its limitations, which she never got over.

The older she got, the more isolated she became from her schoolmates. Laura found it disconcerting, and he in turn found her reaction annoying. "She doesn't have to be prom queen, for God's sake."

"I never said she had to be prom queen. All I said was that she doesn't have to be a hermit. It's not normal for a girl her age to keep to herself so much."

"Ellie's not normal. You know that."

"And I'm very happy that she isn't. I can't think of anything more boring than to have a mediocre child. But she has no friends. Even I had friends, and I was a very exceptional child. She needs people to talk to."

"She talks to us."

"Well, there you go. What healthy adolescent girl spends so much time hanging out with her parents?"

In the mall one Saturday—and oh, the miracle of it all: being seen in public with his teenage daughter! His friends at work would shake their heads in envy and disbelief—they passed Chapters and he saw in the window display a new book by an author he knew was a favorite of Ellie's. But she only shrugged.

"I can't read that stuff anymore, Dad. Any of it. It's not real."

"Well, it's fiction; isn't that the deal?"

"No—I mean—well, they've got it all wrong, I think. I just can't read it anymore."

How many times would that phrase come back to torture him: *They've got it all wrong.*

"Dad, we learned about infinity in math class today. Infinity is the biggest number that there is. It's, like, bigger than anything. You can't ever count to infinity, it's so big."

It was inevitable that she would come to him soon after. "Dad, what's the number just before infinity?"

"I don't know, honey."

"Well, if you could find out, if you could figure out how to make it just a little bit bigger, then you could count to infinity. That'd be cool."

"Yeah."

"But it'd be hard *being* the last number before infinity. You would always be just a little bit away—but you would never be infinity. But you would want to be. You would keep trying to be just a little bit bigger, so that you could be infinity."

Later, perhaps absorbing a streak of Laura's artistic sensibilities, she mused, "I wonder what infinity looks like."

"Infinity's not a place, honey. You can't see it. You can't go there."

"Maybe it is, though. Maybe you can. Tell you what, Dad—when I grow up, I'll find out, and if I can, I'll go there, and come back and tell you what it's like, 'kay?'"

"Okay, honey."

She personified everything. Everything she encountered was endowed with life and feeling and sensation—and with this new perceived sentience came more questions. "Do you suppose rocks get bored, Dad?" "Do trees feel very cold in winter?" "Does the

house get lonely when we aren't here?"

He no longer felt qualified to answer. He no longer felt like he was being asked.

She did well in school—extraordinarily well—and in all her subjects. That, he suspected early on, was because she did not differentiate between them. She faced her schoolwork dispassionately, hating none of it, loving it neither—it was a river, a single, cohesive mass, separable into numberless droplets if you took the time to plunge your hand in and draw bits of it out, isolating it from the rest; otherwise, a whole thing. He used to watch her. She would switch effortlessly and seamlessly from English to Calculus to Geography to Chemistry to French. No pauses, no procrastination, no one-more-hour-of-TV bartering. Her teachers uniformly adored her; one called her a "Renaissance woman"; another gushed enthusiastically at parent-teacher night, "Nothing can stop her. Nothing."

Nothing much in her schoolwork seemed to touch her. The exception might have been *King Lear*. The ending enraged her. "Can you believe it, Dad? Like, five minutes and Cordelia'd still be alive. I mean, that's just wrong. That's horrible. That's just horrible. I can't stand it." Fifteen and encountering her own mortality early.

She had a problem with impermanence—with transience. In her view, the world *should* stop revolving if that was what was required. Waiting was for the weak, compromise for the cowardly. She hated disease—feared it, along with any kind of physical restrictions that might be dealt by chance, or ignorance. She loathed both equally. She listened religiously not to the pop

music worshipped by her peers, but to *Carmina Burana*, and narrowed her eyes knowingly when the chorus came to *Sors immanis et inanis/rota tu volubilis* (Fate monstrous and empty/a whirling wheel you are). He often heard her playing it, like a talisman, far into the night, and wondered what vampires she was trying to drive off.

Academically, she exhibited little inclination towards one field or career in particular, so when she was offered a full scholarship to study theoretical physics at the school, he was told, for such things, it was as much with relief as pride that he took in the news. Vague memories of convenience store parking lots came to him during convocation, as Ellie the valedictorian gave her speech (subject: Ignorance is the greatest scourge of the human race), but he brushed them aside impatiently.

He did not pretend to understand her work. He did not insult her by trying to. But he still felt guilty. He punished himself for being ordinary and for having sired an extraordinary child. It only became worse once she began her post-graduate studies, in a specialization so specialized that it was not yet taught in school, any school, so Ellie and her doctoral advisor and a few others had essentially formed their own faculty, set up their own curriculum, wrote their own textbooks, and gone their own road.

When he asked her what it was exactly that they did, she had said, "We're unraveling time, Dad," and laughed.

She called home on a Friday to tell him that she and the others had been expelled. Well, the regents had not used that word. "Asked to leave" was

what they had actually said, but it amounted to the same thing. She sounded more tired than angry, and would not discuss the extenuating circumstances.

He had tried to be comforting, but that was not what she wanted. She wanted closure. All he could offer was a weak, "Life isn't fair, honey."

"Life *is* fair. It's time that's dishonest. I need more time, Dad. I need to finish."

If he'd been able to understand ...

"They're all wrong, Dad! They've got it all wrong!"

She had tried to explain it to him over her Christmas visit. "Dad, do you know much about cosmology?"

What did she mean, did he know much about it?

"One of the dominant theories is that time and space both came into being simultaneously when the universe was created in the Big Bang billions of years ago. Before that, there was nothing. No time. No space. Absolute nothing. It's a difficult concept to get your mind around ..."

"No kidding."

"Well, I've been doing some new experiments, getting some new data ... and I think maybe there's been an error along the way. I think maybe ... we've been looking at time in the wrong way. It's not a construct of the universe. It's not dependent on space or anything else. It exists separately. It always has. And I think I know how to prove it."

"Prove it?"

"I think it's possible—theoretically at this point, of course—but possible—to get a glimpse of what lies beyond the lifespan of the universe—where space no longer exists—the infinite dimen-

sion where time exists alone. If I could do that—if I could get there—if I could prove that the universe is completely different than what we've thought for years—well."

"Theoretically—that's got to go without saying."

"For now, I said. I think—Dad, I'm getting pretty sure—that it's possible to cross over the line that separates our universe of physicality from the dimension of pure time. So pure, Dad—you can't even imagine it. Not sloppy like this one. Not anything—but time. And you. Imagine it."

"Ellie, you can't exist where there's—nothing—can you?"

"I only need to for a second—a microsecond—less than that—then I'll know. I'll see. Finally." And her eyes burned with a light that reminded him of nothing so much as those damn Stephen King books he'd read as a kid, that had scared the shit out of him; a look no parent should ever see on his child's face, the look that said, "I am going away somewhere, right now, in front of you, where you cannot follow me, cannot protect me."

But a second later the light had faded and she said, "That's the problem, though. How can I? It's *this*—(and she struck herself in the chest so sharply that he winced)—the body, the physical, the gross corporeal sludge—that's what's holding me back—us back—if it weren't for that ..." She trailed off and stared morosely at the carpet.

The call from Ellie's doctoral advisor came late at night.

After coming home from the hospital he and Laura had had it out once and for all. Laura blamed him for everything. Over-indulgent—the "fragile

genius" was crap, a myth, what Ellie needed was more reality, not encouragement from him to lock herself in the damn ivory tower he had constructed for her, away from everyone who loved her and understood her, and leave her with nothing but her own mind to feed on, day after day, until ... she was surprised it hadn't happened sooner.

That she would think he would endanger his own child.

Laura could deal with what had happened to Ellie. What she couldn't deal with...

...and he found himself screaming at her, furious, and shocked—who was this crazy man standing in the middle of his living room?

After all, why shouldn't she come first—she was his child—why shouldn't she come first?

Laura could not accept it. The night became a surreal nightmare of tears and vicious words and slammed doors. This was not him, this was not his wife, this was not his house, this was not his daughter, drugged, crying, lying in a hospital bed with restraints on her wrists... "Dad? Please, Dad ... tell them I'm not crazy, I'm not, please, they're wrong, Dad, please, tell them..."

The whole thing, actually, was something of a relief. He would rather have believed that his child was insane rather than arrogant or stupid.

Laura did not agree.

"My daughter is not crazy!" she'd screamed at the staff psychiatrist that first night, after Ellie's former classmates had dragged her to the hospital in blind panic, afraid, afraid of her, of what she might do to herself. He could not blame them. He could not argue with them. The desperate way she

grabbed hold of his hand, that damned light back in her eyes. "Dad. I think I've figured it out. I took the wings off the dog, and there it was."

How could anyone not think she was crazy?

A condition of her release was that she return home for a while, but it was not so very different than when she had been away. She sat hunched on the sofa in her sweats watching *Secret Agent* and *The Prisoner* reruns on cable and picking at loose threads in the comforter Laura kept tucking compulsively around her whenever she passed through the room. She said little; her only comment one day was, "Patrick McGoochan has a real problem with disclosure, doesn't he?"

He did not press her on the expulsion. In time it came. She and her colleagues had claimed to have created a proto-universe in the lab: a Big Bang under glass.

"You mean, a computer simulation, don't you?"

No. An actual proto-universe. Microscopic—sub-microscopic—but there. It had been Ellie's project. She had wanted to accelerate its development and drive it towards Big Crunch status, and see what happened next. But she didn't. The university had shut them down, shut their doors. "Effrontery ... arrogance ... making a mockery out of academia."

"They didn't believe us, Dad," she said sadly. "They didn't believe what they saw." Exiled in disgrace, for claiming to be God.

She was reading *Alice In Wonderland* again at nights. He came in one night, out of habit and, seeing the old book there sent him spiraling into the past, and the child in the bed was little

Ellie, small, still safe from the world, who he could still protect, who he could still see. He picked up Alice and saw where she had fallen asleep: *"...for it might end, you know," said Alice to herself, 'in my going out altogether, like a candle. I wonder what I should be like then?' And she tried to fancy what the flame of a candle looks like after the candle is blown out, for she could not remember ever having seen such a thing."*

After a month, she was so calm that the doctors made no objections to her moving back to her apartment. He visited her whenever he could make the excuses sound convincing—to her or to him, he was never quite sure. He was there the day she had a vicious silent argument with someone over the phone, an argument that consisted almost entirely of her whispering fiercely behind the swinging kitchen door, which she kicked repeatedly with her foot. She came out looking so haggard and exhausted he must have showed his alarm in his face, but she shook her head and attempted a smile. I'm fine, Dad, honest, let's go to Taco Bell now, okay?

He asked her repeatedly to move back home, or closer to it. No, she had to stay near the university. She had a friend there, a contact—she would not give his name—who let her use the laboratory clandestinely, along with a few others, to carry on the work that had been interrupted.

He paid her a surprise visit over the Easter long weekend, and was frightened by her appearance.

"Ellie—you don't look well. You ought to see a doctor."

"No, Dad, honest, I'm fine." And he believed her, and didn't, helplessly.

She came by unexpectedly one afternoon. She was going to Geneva to attend a seminar and needed, she said, her passport.

"I could have sent it to you," he said.

"Well. I wanted to say hello. I was wondering if you could take care of my goldfish while I'm away. Is Mom here?"

Mom was not here much anymore. Ellie said it was too bad, she really had to be going. "Well. I'll see you then, Dad."

It was three days before anyone else noticed Ellie was missing; three days before he could persuade the police to break down the door of her apartment (the landlord having vanished also, inexplicably and with his passkey). The rooms stank of old food and old laundry. There were unwashed convenience food cans in the kitchen sink, crusted with remnants of Chef Boyardee and Campbell's soup. The ones on the top of the pile were full. The phone had been disconnected. There were no working light bulbs. The plug on her clock radio had been torn so violently from the wall socket that the fixture hung on the cord.

The posters on her walls of Einstein, Newton, Hawking, Zho Li—all her idols—were defaced now; someone (he tried hard not to see the remains of Ellie's handwriting in the vicious scrawls), someone had slurred the word *LIAR!* across the face of every one of them, the words torn from the Magic Marker in outrage, the weaving black scribbles barely forming letters, as if the anger of the hand forming them had not been able to wait, as if in its haste to purge the rage the words themselves had been lost, and only the anger remained.

The laboratory, if there had ever been one, was gone; the police wandered skeptically and disinterestedly through an antiseptic room full of weatherbeaten computer monitors and incomprehensible bulletin boards, asking laconic questions of the sweating grad student who supervised it. Her friends, her colleagues who had been similarly disgraced, were silent and frightened. One, a thin, blonde boy with ragged cuticles, whom he suspected had been in love with Ellie, came closest to disclosure.

"She's gone over," he whispered. "She went."

Two days later, he phoned the university to speak to Ellie's doctoral advisor, only to be told he was no longer there. On an extended sabbatical. Yes, I could certainly try to get a message to him, sir, if you wish. He left one, expecting no response and getting none.

A few weeks later, he came home from work to find that Laura had left, taking her potter's wheel, her découpage, and her glue gun. The glue gun told him that she was serious.

Through the phone calls that would come in the middle of the night, whose callers hung up as soon as he answered, all he could think was, Yes, Ellie, the house gets very lonely when we are not here. Now, at last, too late, the answers began to come to him.

And he also thought often of the e-mail that had arrived, time-delayed, the day after Ellie had disappeared, the note that he had not, after all, shown to the police nor, after a few moments of proprietary agony, to Laura, the note that read:

Dad —

*I've found the number before
infinity.*

Ellie

Her teacher had been on to something, then; had been right when she had declared, "Nothing can hold her." In the end, nothing did.

Nothing was all that could. ❁

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: TRACY KENDERDINE holds a Master's degree in English Literature, which she hopes will prove useful for breaking into the lucrative career field of Warrior Princess. Conceived in Saskatchewan, born in Toronto, she lives in Calgary—this week, anyway—patiently awaiting the arrival of the Mother Ship. "The Number Before Infinity" is her first professional sale.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: ROBERT BOERBOOM spends most of his time drawing and painting in his Brantford studio where he has been immersed in a wide variety of artistic endeavors.

A daughter's a daughter

Sandra Kasturi

*A son is a son till he takes him a wife,
A daughter's a daughter for the rest of your life.*

— Traditional

Persephone lies
eyes open, smiling
a heavy coin under her tongue
waiting for her bridegroom.

Demeter cries
above-ground, become a common harridan
screeching for her mislaid daughter
while the land lies fallow
the people starve
and Hades, unblinking, smirks.

In the grey palace of the dead
in milady's chamber
he places his bone cold hand
against her belly
and she
surfeited with the seed
of the pomegranate

smiles
and does not hear
winter crackling on the surface.

Demeter spies
her daughter
under the cold ground
and drags her by her hair
unwilling
into the open air.

Persephone tries
to escape her mother's wary eye
each and every year
to return to her handsome and
remote bridegroom
while Demeter wishes wholeheartedly
that she had given birth to a
boy. 🍁



Vivaldi's Spring

paulo da costa

illustrated by yum design

The video-phone rings.

"Hi, Sabina! You look absolutely fantastic. I'm terribly sorry I won't be able to join you. You know, last minute transmogrify to Orpheus. When are you expecting?"

"Any moment now." A radiant smile dresses the mother-to-be face. The room, decorated in pink ribbons and balloons, bubbles with festivity.

Cristiana blows Sabina a good-bye kiss while simultaneously projecting a 3-D stork into the room. Higher up, a few balloons pop. The room bursts in laughter.

Champagne flutes sweep in mid-air and converge with a clink. Good auspices. Vivaldi's "Spring" plays in the background.

The grandmother, in her twenties, steps forward, deposits a pinkish package on the future mother's lap. She sits beside her. This is a most awaited moment. The grandmother will reveal the child's name, lovingly embroidered on the sweater she knitted herself. Sabina accepts the gift and places the envelope with the birth expenses on the grandmother's lap. They exchange light kisses.

Tess, unable to contain her excitement, reaches over Sabina's shoulder and tears the pinkish wrapping paper. The violin sounds unusually loud in the abrupt silence. Tess mouths the given name, brings her hand over her lips. She wears a blue-colored ribbon on her wrist, distinguishing her as one of the half of the population still working. She cannot afford designer babies and their copyright birth names.

"Inina! It's so unusual!" Sabina finally exclaims, throwing a stone glance at Tess.

Everyone sighs and claps.

Champagne flutes are once again raised and one by one the women predict good omens for the child's future. A nightingale's voice to enchant, a smile to endear, the gift to grow genuine and hardworking like the parents.

Tess is unusually quiet. Her motherhood license expires in twenty-four hours. On her twentieth birthday. In the past, she has succeeded in avoiding baby showers. Miguel insists he is not one for children. She has numbed the matter, out of sight, out of feeling, until now. Miguel, anticipating her emotions, had slipped an anti-anxiety pill into her purse. Sabina looks lovely in her maternity dress. Tess reaches for the purse. Hesitates.

The remote control crib, the atomic powered rocking-horse, the wardrobe of tiny endearing garments, awaken Tess' motherly instincts.

The video-phone rings again.

"Congratulations, Sabina, your contractions have just begun." Doctor Hoffman appears on the screen, a chart in his hand, reading glasses nearly slipping off the tip of his nose. The room erupts in festive celebration. More balloons pop. Paper streamers shoot through the air. Sabina barely contains joyous tears.

"How long would you like the labor to last?"

Sabina is speechless. The grandmother, cool-headed in these occasions, steps forward and asks those present if one hour suits everyone. She receives cheers for an answer.

"An hour will be just fine, Doctor Hoffman," she winks knowingly.

Everyone gathers in a crescent moon around the monitor. Sabina and the grandmother sit at the front. The grandmother holds the future mother's hand. A woman sitting behind Sabina massages her shoulders.

Tess walks to the window. Outside, the men in the controlled environment yard toss a football. Now and then they pause to glance up at the window. Nuno, the father, stands by the barbecue, oiling the grasshoppers in a peppercorn marinade. Tess waves to Miguel and walks back to join the women. The monitor focuses on the baby, who stirs in a Plexiglas case. Clear plastic tubes attach to the bottom and disappear from view. Vivaldi's flute lends its calm aura to the room. The baby's tiny hands curl in a fist. Sabina holds the camera's remote control and zooms in on the face. Eyelids and mouth closed, the baby begins to turn. Her wonderfully perfect feet kick in slow motion. The seconds tick leisurely in face of new life being born.

The baby's toes wriggle. Collective chuckles of pleasure follow. Tess decides to surprise Miguel. Tomorrow she will stop by the cash-and-carry Morning Star birth clinic and pick up a baby on her way home. She will charge it to her credit card even if that means she will have to work five extra hours a week for ten years.

Doctor Hoffman's voice returns.

"So, what do you think?"

"A work of art, doctor. Exactly how I had envisioned her." Sabina claps lightly, then rests her hands over her heart.

The baby girl already shows the

first strands of black hair on her head. Her nose speaks of Roman perfection, her skin of Scandinavian paleness, with the option to tan; her lips, thin and tiny, reflect Sabina's only concession to this year's fashion. She did not wish to produce a misfit child, teased for the rest of her life by same year peers. The baby does not resemble either parent. A future advantage in adolescence, when she will surely avoid being identified with embarrassing parents. Sabina confided to Tess that she requested state-of-the-art chromosomes, everything she had fantasized for herself.

Tess knows she cannot expect much from a last-minute motherhood impulse. There is very little trait selection available in the twenty-four hour outlets. She will live with the less than perfect child, rejected by disillusioned parents faced with unplanned developments.

She will avoid the School of Genetics' outlet and their artsy aberrations, experiments with fringe aesthetic theories: multi-shaded eyes, asymmetrical ears, a nose dangling from a least-expected place. She admits her fondness for the race mosaics. Nordic hair with African skin and Asian eyes. Quaint! Exotic and in good taste. A celebration of humanity.

At the sixty-minute mark, a beep signals the birth is imminent. Tess sees Sabina's hand trembling.

Doctor Hoffman's voice returns.

"Come on, Sabina, you can do it. This is the big moment. You cannot falter now. Push. Push."

The grandmother tenderly kisses

Sabina's forehead and helps her point the remote control at the Plexiglas. Sabina, showing duress in her clenched jaw, finally pushes the button.

A gong resonates loudly throughout the room. On the monitor a gigantic hammer swings, cracks the Plexiglas case. The brine water solution breaks and spills in a torrent. The newborn cries.

Tess will not relinquish such an important moment in the birth experience. She detests the impersonal and dehumanizing probes of technology. The hammer, she will swing herself. And after the waters break, she will pick up the child in her arms and hold her next to her heart. Tess understands the baby's need to hear the mother's heartbeat for a healthy bonding experience. She does not care if her friends accuse her of behaving like a Luddite.

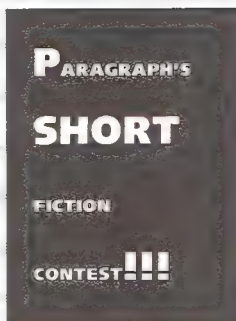
Outside, the men, hearing the much-awaited gong, cheer. Feet hammer along the corridor; the father rushes into the room and runs to the monitor, now focusing on the baby's smiley face. He covers the screen in a million kisses. Next, he kisses the exhausted mother. The jubilant father opens a six-foot champagne bottle and showers the guests with the geyser of foam. The din drowns the last notes on Vivaldi's "Spring." The celebration will continue into the night and the following morning. The grandmother turns the screen off as everyone walks to the controlled environment yard, a champagne flute in hand, following the aroma of barbecued grasshoppers. 🍀

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PAULO DA COSTA shares his time between the foothills of the Rockies and the northern hills of Portugal. This is his first published fiction. another of his stories is forthcoming on CBC Radio.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: YUM DESIGN lives and works in Toronto. She was included in a group show, "White Elephant," that took place in Toronto in March '98. New work can be seen in *Heterology*, a magazine of critical text and art, soon to be in print and online at www.heterology.com.

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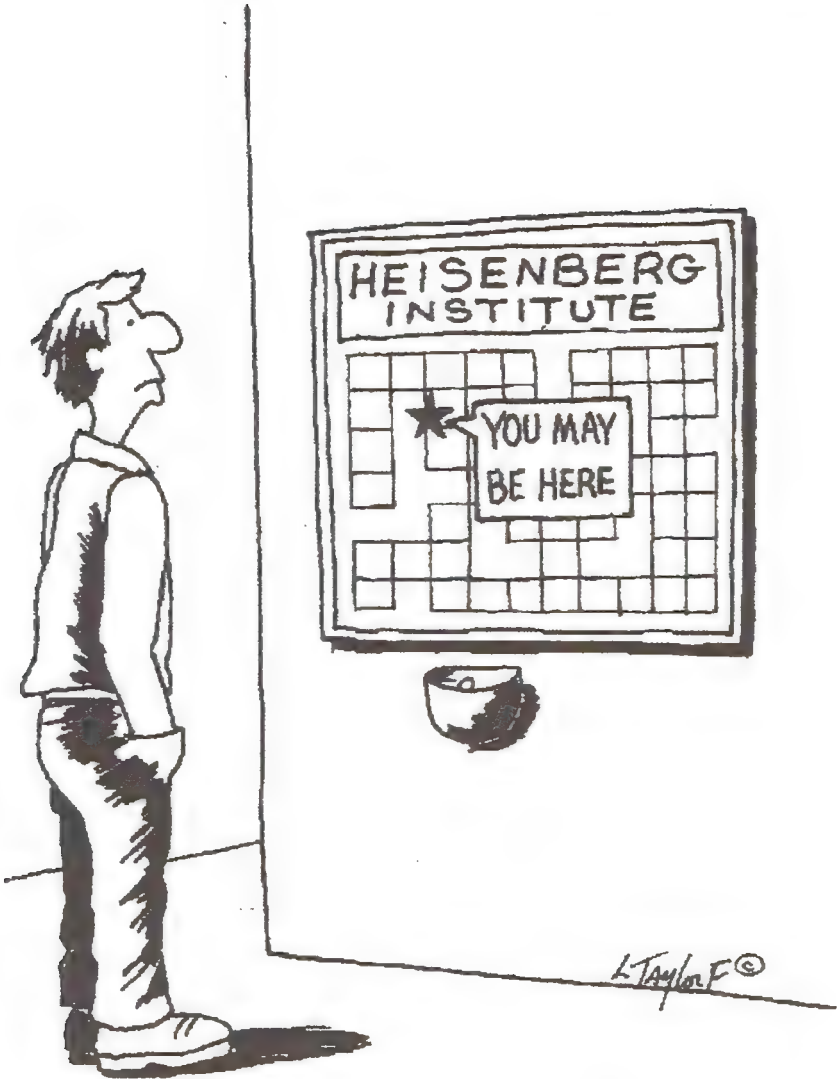
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On the edge

Lynne Taylor Fahnestalk





The Fourth Horseman

Peter Sommer

illustrated by Adrian Kleinbergen

I was tossing the daily batch of tumbleweeds into the ravine at the town's edge when I first saw the Preacher gang. A moving black dot far out in the killing heat of the badlands, like a mirage. They were following the old road into town, which nobody had ridden since I'd come back all those years ago. By the time I was done the tumbleweeds, I could see that there were three of them. I went back into town and fixed myself some lunch in the general store. Canned beans and the last of the beef jerky. After that I played a hand of solitaire and watched some stray clouds drift across the sky. When I went out for another look, they'd come even closer. I knew they'd have to be pretty determined to make it all the way in—the sun was burning hot enough to set bare skin on fire—but there was something in the air that said they weren't just out for a Sunday ride. I went back in and waited for everyone to wake up.

I was with Catherine at the rooming house when they rode into town later that night. She was reading to me from one of her books, a story about three women living together in an old house, and I'd drifted off in one of the chairs. I dreamed that I was riding out of town on Apache, my horse that I'd shot outside the chapel. He was alive again, bones covered with strong flesh once more, and pulling against the reins, wanting to run. On the road out, we passed a slow-moving train carving a track through the hard dirt, towards the town. The whole thing was on fire,

flames bursting impossibly out of the steel and iron. I knew that it would set the dry wood of the town's buildings alight like so much kindling, and tried to turn around, but Apache wouldn't let me. He took us forward, across the iron rails and wooden ties left behind by the train, and out into the badlands. I awoke when Catherine suddenly shushed and looked to the window. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes and then got up from the chair and pulled back the lace curtains. The street outside was empty except for the light and music spilling into it from the saloon, but I grabbed my gun belt from the chair anyway. Catherine's senses had been better than mine since she'd changed.

I only had to wait a minute before they came out of the darkness at the end of the street. Two men and a woman, she as hard-looking as them. Pale faces and hands floating in the night, clothes all black except for white tabs at the collars. Horses grey as ghosts. "We've got visitors," I said, voice catching in my throat. I buckled on my guns.

Catherine came to the window and looked out. "Maybe they're just passing through," she said. "Let the others handle them."

"You know I can't do that," I said, and put on my hat. She looked at my badge with an expression I didn't understand, then turned her gaze to the window again.

Outside, they stopped in front of the saloon and sat on their horses a while longer, looking around. Dead tired. One of them noticed us in the window and said something to the others. All three looked over for a second. Then

they dismounted and talked for a bit. The biggest of the men seemed to be giving directions. The smaller man went inside the saloon; the others split up and went down opposite ends of the street. As if they were scouting the town. "Stay here," I said to Catherine.

"Be careful," she answered.

The street was empty again by the time I walked outside. Just old Lester, the town drunk, already half passed out in the doorway of the barber shop, empty bottle in his hand. He was humming an old hymn, which was unusual, because he hardly ever made a noise. And there were the horses. They rolled their eyes a little when I walked up to the hitching post, and we looked at each other for a moment. They were scrawny, with ribs showing, and bent in the middle. Old pack horses which should have been put to pasture at least three years ago. A rifle and near-empty saddlebag on each. I thought about Apache again for a moment, how he'd refused to leave when I'd freed him after we came back to town, and how I had to shoot him before he starved to death. Then I forced the thought out of my mind and stepped into the saloon.

Nothing inside was moving but the keys on the player piano. The stranger stood leaning against the bar, a bottle and shot glass before him. He was staring into the mirror, in which only our two reflections appeared. His expression said he'd just now realized there was something not right about that. The crowd of vamps filling the rest of the room watched him closely from their tables and booths, drinks and poker cards forgotten in their hands. Like they couldn't believe what they were seeing. His eyes met mine, settled

on my badge for a second, and then he slowly turned around. He couldn't have been any older than twenty, but his face and hands were all pocked with the marks of some disease. He wore the black shirt of a priest and his duster was pulled back, away from the gun on his hip. The first living person I'd seen since I came back from the outside world.

"Well," he said in a rustling voice, "I'm most thankful to see you, sheriff." He made a little gesture at the rest of the room. "I see that your town is suffering from an infestation of ... that which has no place in God's good world. Perhaps you could help me attend to the problem."

I walked up to the bar and Kitty came over to pour me a bourbon. "If I were you," I said, "I'd be careful about how I talked about the residents of this town. I don't want anybody starting any trouble." Up close I could see the beads of sweat on his lip.

He glanced past Kitty at my reflection, as if checking to see it was still there, then turned to the room again and said in a flat voice, "Well, perhaps you ain't noticed yet, sheriff, but these here residents are God-damned vampires."

"You got nothing to fear if you keep to yourself," I said. "They only drink each other's blood." His eyes darted to the bottle beside him, then back to me. "There ain't no point in tempting fate though. I suggest you and your friends leave now, while you still can."

Keeping his eyes fixed on me, he leaned close until I could smell the whiskey on his breath and the sweat on his clothes. Because the vamps don't sweat, it'd been years since I smelled

that from another person, and it hit me like some sort of rare spice. "We've been riding close to a week now," he said. "Ever since we talked to the owner of a general store in Dry Gulch. You might know him: the man runs supplies in here a couple times of a year. Always in the day."

"I know him," I said.

"Right. Well, he said that he'd sooner spend a season in hell than stay here for a night, let alone live here. That made us a little curious, so we looked at some maps. And guess what?"

"What?"

The stranger poured himself another drink and smiled at me. "This here town shows up on the old maps, but not the new ones. Like it just faded away with time. We figured maybe we'd be riding into some sort of ghost town."

"What did you come for, then?" I asked.

Slowly, so as not to alarm anyone, he reached into one of the duster pockets and pulled out a worn Bible. "Where there's a dead town," he said, licking his cracked lips, "there's always souls to be saved." He stepped away from the bar then, into the middle of the room, and held the book over his head. "Friends," he called, his voice rising into a wheezing groan. "Allow me to introduce myself, for I bring salvation to this town."

Nobody said anything. Their eyes were captured by the Bible and all the smiles were gone now. The piano ran down into silence.

"God has given me the name of Pestilence," he went on, "because I too have been diseased. Not like you, but

diseased nevertheless. And it was only the good book here that saved me. When I held it in my hand for the first time, and read its pages, I felt the angry hand of God move through me and guide me into the path I now ride. He has led me here today, which can only mean that He's decided the time has come for you." He turned in a circle so everyone could see the Bible. "Which of you will let me be your savior? Which of you will accept everlasting salvation and live forever in God's good grace?"

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news, mister," Kitty said, "but we're already living forever in your God's grace, for whatever good it's done us. And we've managed to get along fine without you so far. Besides which, what you're holding there is our destruction, not our salvation." There were murmurs of agreement from the others.

Pestilence turned to her. His lips curled up a little, maybe into a smile. "Well," he said, "the Bible does preach that destiny is a matter of personal choice." He came back to the bar and helped himself to another shot. Then, with a little shrug to me, he went for his gun.

He was quick, or I was slower with age, and he managed to get off a shot before I pulled my own trigger. The mirror behind the counter came crashing down and Kitty swore. Metal noise and smoke filled the air. My bullet blew through the Bible and into his chest. Knocked a dust cloud out of him. He jerked back a couple of feet. I could see him through the hole in his book. One of the pages slipped out and fluttered to the floor. He just stared at me and refused to fall, despite the

spreading stain in his shirt. "Damn," he breathed. "I thought you were one of us."

"I ain't nothing but the law," I said. "And nobody comes into my town shooting. Not as long as my fiancée is one of these God-damned vampires."

His gun hand twitched at that, so I shot him again. He went down this time, into an empty chair behind him. "God," he croaked, and looked real puzzled. Then his head fell back until he was facing the empty ceiling. You could have mistaken him for a drunk.

I turned back to the bar. The mirror lay in shards on the floor and Kitty was examining a cut on her arm. "He get you?" I asked.

She shook her head and said, "Glass." She licked up the blood that was oozing out.

"I could use some coffee," I said, and reloaded my revolver. "I think it's going to be a long night."

I went to the door and had a long look up and down the street. The horses had caught the scent of blood and were starting to act up a little. I didn't blame them. Pestilence's fellow riders were nowhere to be seen. I knew it'd only be a matter of time, though, before the boy's friends came to investigate the shots. Behind me came the sounds of chairs being pushed away from tables and then boots walking across the floor. "That boy is plagued," I said by way of warning, but didn't look back.

"It's all right, sheriff," Kitty said. "That ain't one of the things that can kill us."

I waited until they'd dragged the body into the back room and closed the door before I turned around. I was

the only person left in the saloon. There was a coffee waiting for me on the counter.

Catherine came in just as I was finishing it off. I'd moved to one of the booths, from which I could see the horses and part of the street. A couple of the vamps had wandered back out from the other room and were sitting around with glazed eyes. Catherine looked at them, at the blood on the floor, and at the gun on my table. She sat down. "What happened?" she asked.

"Preacher men," I said. "Come here to save us."

"There were just two shots," she said.

I nodded and said, "I only got the first. The others are still out there."

She looked to the door, and her lips slowly pulled back until her fangs showed. I didn't think she knew she was doing it. "This is dangerous," she said. "Let us take care of them."

I put my hand over hers. The engagement ring I'd given her was warm on her finger, like she'd been toying with it. "What's the matter with you?" I asked. "Do you want to be like them?" She looked at me again, lips settling back into place, and I could tell she knew I meant those first vampires who had started all this. A couple just like any other, taking a stopover on their way to Dry Gulch. Him dressed up as a businessman, her as his wife. I never would have caught on to what they were doing if I hadn't paid Catherine a visit after she missed Sunday service. Middle of the day and there she was still lying in bed, two little marks on her wrist. Snake bite, I'd thought, until she appeared at my win-

dow that night, still in her bedclothes. "Help me," she'd said. "Don't let them take me." By the time I shot them down in the street, those vampires had infected half the town and the rest of the townsfolk had cleared out into the badlands. I was the only one who stayed and kept this town hanging on to the human world.

"I'd better have a look around," I told Catherine, and got up. Just then the face of the big man from the Preacher gang appeared over the doors, his eyes like black dots. He took in the vamps, the bloodstain on the floor, and then looked at me. We both went for our guns at the same time. Bullets started flying and gunsmoke came in through the doorway. Glass broke all around. I hit the floor and fired back, shooting through the doors and the wall. The face vanished and the firing stopped. I ducked behind a table and looked around the room. The other vamps were on the floor, Catherine curled up in the booth. Nobody'd been hit.

"Pestilence?" a deep voice called.

"Your friend is dead," I yelled back. "An act of lawful self-defense. If I were you, I'd be leaving before the same happens to you."

"We can't do that, sheriff," came the reply. "We're on a mission here."

"What kind of mission?" The voice kept moving, and I could hear footsteps, but I couldn't pinpoint the location.

"We're scouring the land, making it clean for the Lord."

"Let me guess. The end of the world is coming, right?" I shook my head and reloaded my gun.

"Oh, it's upon us, sheriff. We're living in Judgment Day. Haven't you seen

the signs? Metal ships floating on water, men flying like birds just a week's ride from here. Medicine to cure all our ailments. And trains crossing this land everywhere, bringing the good word of the Bible and peace to all. We're already living in the earthly paradise. All we need to do now is wipe it clean, get rid of the last specks of the unholy and the immoral, and the heavenly paradise will descend upon us for all eternity. You can ride with us in this righteous mission, sheriff. Just say the word and we'll cleanse this town together, with the hellfires of the Lord!"

Earthly paradise. I'd been out there in that paradise for two years after the town changed, and it had almost killed me. Nobody wanted to hire a sheriff from a forgotten town, and all the horse jobs had vanished, so the only work I could find was laying railroad track. No home but the railway camp, barely enough money to buy food, and my thoughts dwelling on Catherine back here, lying alone and unprotected during the day. It had been enough to drive me to drink for the better part of a year. I'd only snapped out of it when somebody offered to trade me a bottle of whiskey for Apache, and I'd found myself seriously considering it. After that, I pinned my badge back on and rode home, sobering up on the way. The townsfolk had accepted me back without a word, and handed over all their money so I could keep the supply wagon coming.

"I've already seen your paradise," I shouted, "and there ain't nothing in it for any of us."

"All right then," he said, and opened up again. Bullets seemed to come from everywhere and pieces of the table

blew off all around me. I ducked back down and tried to figure out from the sounds where he was.

"I know where he is," Catherine hissed at me from under the booth's table.

I wanted to do this on my own, without her help, but I had to consider it anyway. This guy had my number and pretty soon the other rider would show up. That would put us all in a really bad position. I finally looked at her and nodded.

"By the gun shop," she whispered. I poked my Colt around the table and fired a few shots in that direction. There was a grunt, then the sounds of rapid footsteps moving away.

I picked my hat up off the floor and then ran along the edge of the room, to the door. When I had a look outside again, the street was empty once more. A bullet had sliced through one of the horses' reins and it had run off, leaving only two. The rifles were missing now, I noticed. I glanced up at the sky; it was starting to lighten a little. There were only another three or four hours before everyone had to be in bed, out of the sunlight for the day.

All the other vamps came barreling out of the back room then, fangs exposed and snarling like wild dogs. Some of them had blood around their lips. They looked ready to charge out into the night so I stepped in front of the doors. Started reloading my gun. "Where do you think you're going?" I said to them.

Old Bill stepped up to the front of the crowd. He used to run the general store, back when they were still all people, and he figured that gave him some sort of authority. "After them," he

said, pointing out the door. "Before they get away and tell somebody else about us."

"They ain't leaving," I said. "They could've jumped on their horses just now but they didn't. They believe they got some sort of business here."

That gave them pause. Bill eventually said, "Well, we should really get after them before the sun comes up then. Who knows what they'll do to us during the day?" The others, looking a little worried, nodded agreement and started forward.

I cocked the hammer of my gun, and they all stopped. "This ain't no lawless town," I said quietly. "First one of you who tries to step out this door to commit murder, I'll put in a coffin for good."

"Hey now, sheriff," Bill said. "You're talking to your own people here, not them strangers."

"I ain't one of you," I snapped. "I'm the law. And you'd better decide right now whether you're willing to accept that or not."

They didn't look too happy about it, but they stayed put. "All right," I went on. "I want you to go to the hotel. Hole up in the rooms there for the rest of the night. Put somebody on guard in case they try to get in. I'm going after them myself. Anybody I see on the street, I'm likely to shoot."

"And what're we supposed to do if they come in?" Kitty asked, from the back.

"Then you can consider yourselves deputized," I said, and left the rest up to them.

They went to the hotel then, moving in a large, muttering group. No one took a shot at them. I wouldn't have

either, if I was out there watching. Catherine was the last to go. "Let me come with you," she said.

"No."

"You know I can help. I'm better in the night than you are now."

"No," I said again. "This is no business for a lady."

She shook her head, then sighed and looked up at the stars. "Why can't you accept the fact that we've changed? All of us." I watched dark shadows mix with the white moonlight on her throat, but didn't say anything. "Bill was right," she said, after a while. "What happens in the day?"

"That's why I'm here," I said.

She looked back at me, then at the ground. "I'll be watching," she said softly, and followed the others. She picked up Lester on the way, so he wouldn't get burned up in the dawn, and threw him over one shoulder.

"Fire!" he suddenly yelled in his sleep. "The hellfire of God." Then he started laughing, and wouldn't stop.

When the vamps were all inside, I untied the remaining horses and let them go. They broke for the edge of town and were gone in seconds, melting back into the night like dreams. I suddenly felt very alone, and for different reasons than usual. Then I put it out of my head and went in search of the remaining members of the Preacher gang, who now wouldn't be riding out of town to warn anybody else.

I'd gotten lucky and hit the second man in a major vein. The blood trail led me on a winding trail through the scattering of houses off main street until I found him lying face down near the funeral home. I rolled him over with my foot and kept my gun on him, but

it didn't matter much. He had two holes in his stomach and had given up on breathing. There was a medal pinned to his chest; he'd been a soldier of some sort.

There was only the woman left now, and I had a pretty good idea of where she was. Just past the funeral home was the abandoned chapel at the outskirts of town. I figured this one had been heading there. The only place in town the vamps wouldn't willingly enter, and the only place that didn't have other buildings right next to it. It was set off on its own, surrounded by a little graveyard with fallen-over markers. A good position to defend. She was probably in there right now, trying to pick me out in the dark.

I stepped up onto the funeral home's porch and sat down on a stool by the door. There were no signs of life from the church. If she was inside, she was waiting for daylight. I didn't blame her. I looked at the bones of Apache out front, half-covered now by dust, and settled in for a wait.

I fell asleep there, and dreamed about going to visit Catherine. Something called me down the street, past the tumbleweeds and cobwebs that had collected again, up the stairs of her rooming house, past all the empty rooms and to her door. "Come in," she said when I knocked. She was lying under the covers of her bed, naked.

I knelt on the floor and said, "Please." She looked at me, then got up. Before I could react, she threw herself out the window. I jumped to my feet and went down the stairs three at a time, then back out onto the street. She was halfway down it already, running away. I raced after her, drawing

my gun. "Please," I shouted. "Oh, please." But her bare feet kept pounding into the ground, taking her away from me.

The sounds turned into the drumming of hooves, which woke me. I was up off the stool with my eyes open in time to see a riderless horse galloping down the street, hooves slamming into the ground like a sledgehammer. For a moment, in the dim light of early morning, I thought it was Apache. Then I realized it was one of the Preacher gang horses. It tossed its head at me as it went past, and I looked back to the chapel after it disappeared, to make sure Apache's bones were still there.

That was when the whole world reared up and knocked me to the ground. Everything went dark for a moment and then I found myself lying face-up in the street, the taste of blood in my mouth. I could tell from the numbness in my shoulder that I'd been shot solid. I tried to move, but it was the hardest thing I'd ever done. There was a roaring in my ears. I tried looking around, but could only move my head a little. My badge was lying beside me, knocked off from the impact, my Colt a few feet beyond that.

Then the woman appeared above me, a rifle in her hands and another Bible sticking out of her pocket. Up close I could see she was thin as a ghost, the skin stretched tight across her bones. Her eyes were like pebbles in their sockets. "Nice try, you son of a bitch," she hissed, "but there ain't nothing but a miracle that can save you now."

Some of my strength was coming back, along with a fair share of pain, but it was too late. She had me where

she wanted me.

"What the hell are you anyway?" she asked. "I'd say you're a man, but no man with a soul left would live in a town of vampires."

"I'm the law," I tried to say, but it came out only as a breath that she couldn't hear.

"It doesn't matter anyway," she said. She sighted down the barrel and winked at me. "When you and all your damned friends meet our Maker, you tell Him Famine sent you." Her finger tightened on the trigger. Then loosened as a terrible howling came from up the street. She looked up, and her mouth slid open. I managed to turn my head around to see.

It was Catherine. She'd been watching like she said, and now she was running right at us. Catching fire from the sun as she did so. First her dress lit up and then her very skin. The howling was coming from her mouth, as she flared up like a human candle. Fire eating away at every inch of her.

"Good God!" the woman breathed, and I screamed, "No!"

Then Catherine hit the Preacher woman as hard as a locomotive going full tilt and she suddenly wasn't above me anymore. Her rifle fired harmlessly into the dirt as Catherine bore her down to the ground and rolled around with her. Her duster caught fire and then they were both making pain noises and pawing at themselves.

I pushed myself up to my feet, grabbed my gun, and shot the Preacher woman twice. She stopped moving. I ripped off her duster, and threw it, and myself, over Catherine.

When I'd smothered the flames, I wrapped Catherine up in the duster, so

the sun couldn't touch any part of her. She didn't move in my arms. We lay there a few more minutes while I gathered my strength, and then I took her into the shade of the funeral parlor. I left the other woman to burn there in the street. Several pages of the Bible came loose and went sailing down the street, like floating candles. Somehow, they didn't touch a single building. "A miracle," Old Bill said when he came out later that night. "The whole town could have gone up." They landed in the ravine and started a bonfire, eating up all the tumbleweeds that had collected, and exposing the skeletons I'd thrown there so many years ago. When the flames were at their height, I threw the bodies into the ravine, on top of all that was left of those first vampires. Everything in there is buried under a layer of ash now.

Catherine was burned bad. She was still breathing, but wouldn't wake up. I moved her out of the coat and into wet blankets at the hotel that night, but it didn't help any. She just lay there on our bed, deathly silent, twitching a little every now and then. The other vamps hung around the halls, pale faces and noses twitching at the scent of my blood, until I told them to get the hell out. The only one I let get near us was Doc Pederson, and that was just to bandage my wounds. He didn't even touch Catherine. "There's nothing I can do," he said.

She was like that for three days. I finally decided I had to do something else. On the fourth night, I collected her up in my arms and took her to the chapel. Everybody stood in the street and watched silently as I carried her through the doors. I wasn't sure what

would happen. Nothing did. I laid her down on the altar and got on my knees, for the first time in a long while. Said a few words aloud. Then I settled in to wait.

We've been there ever since. My own wound is infected, and some days the fever nearly knocks me out. Doc Pederson checks it when I come out for food and water, but doesn't look too optimistic. He said to me once, "You know, if it gets too bad we can always stop you from dying." I knew what he meant and told him to forget it. He won't come into the chapel, so I change Catherine's bandages and trickle water from a sponge over her broken skin. She moans and cries out sometimes, but never awakens.

Old Bill came to the door one night with my badge, and said, "Thought you might be wanting this, sheriff." I didn't move, didn't even look at him. When he went away again, he tossed the badge into Apache's bones and

said, "You can't stay in there forever, you know."

Catherine is stirring more and more now. Crying out and thrashing in her sleep. I hold her hand and talk to her about things we did so long ago, I'm not even sure if they are real or imagined. Once she tried to bring my wrist to her mouth, and it took everything I had left to pull back. Every now and then she has coughing fits, which get so bad they threaten to tear her apart. Like something inside her is trying to fight its way out.

During the days, she is as quiet and still as the inside of the chapel, and I sit on the steps, looking out into the empty badlands for signs of more riders. Yesterday I picked the badge up out of the bones and put it on again. Old Bill's words keep hanging in my head. "You can't stay in there forever."

Right now though, there isn't anything else I can do except wait. Wait and see just what forever is. ♣

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: PETER SOMMER currently lives in the United States, where he writes fiction in an attempt to make sense of American culture.

ABOUT THE ARTIST: ADRIAN KLEINBERGEN was born in 1961 in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He has been described as a self-pitying—I mean self-styled—Renaissance man. Besides drawing and painting, he has added sculpture, caricature, writing, costuming, and music decomposition to his repertoire of superhuman skills. Adrian has always felt the need to make art, whether it was for fun, profit or both. "It's just something I need to do," he will reply if asked. He ran his own comic publishing company (into the ground) and was the primary artist and columnist for the magic magazine, *The Servante*. He has constructed prototype models for a local model-manufacturing company and has painted theatrical backdrops for the stage. He also does artwork on commission, and is a cosmically cool guy.

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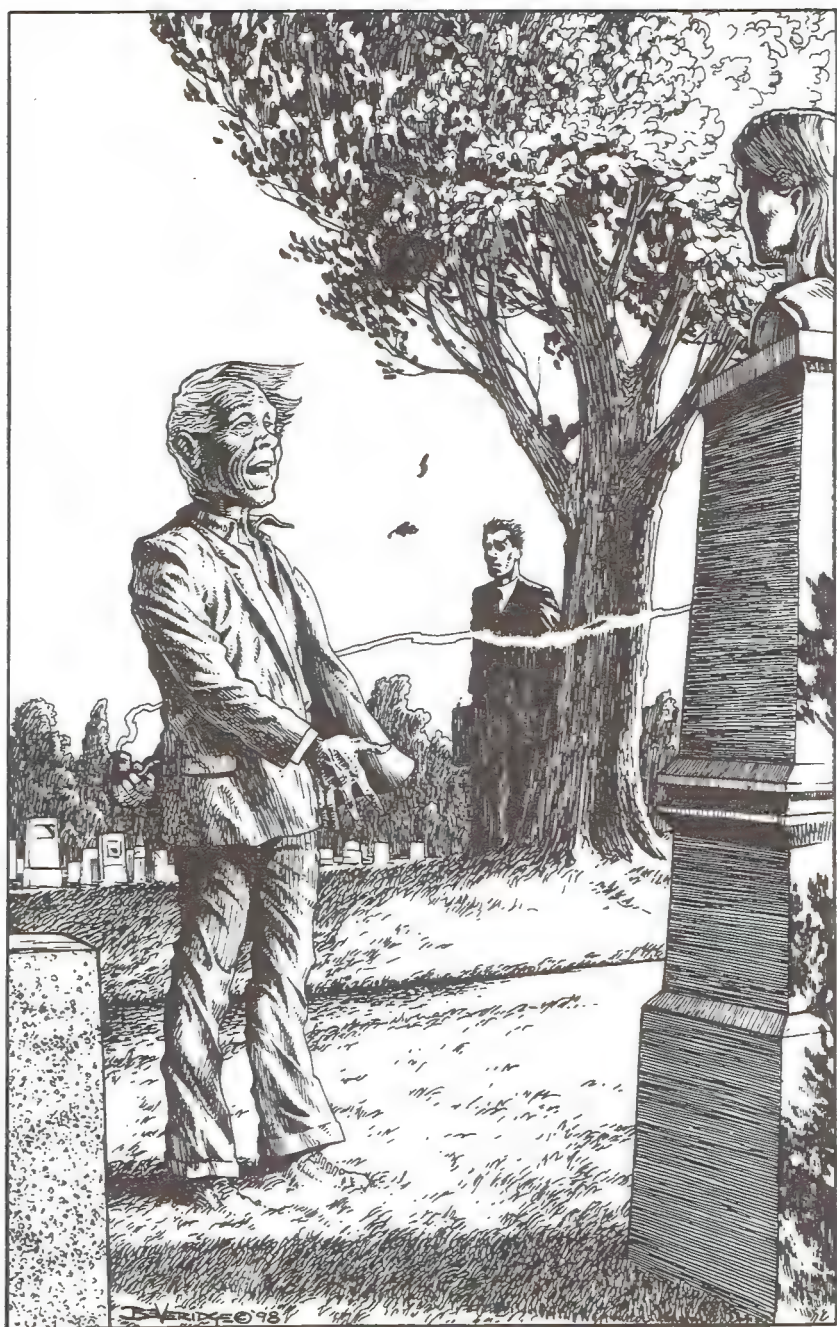
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Eavesdropping

John Graham

illustrated by James Beveridge

Tom loathed the rare occasions when the cemetery was noisy, and today, it was quite raucous. The shouting family was visiting their Grandpapa for the first time this spring. Immense Grandmama, her thundering monologue peppered with one word of English: Okay? Okay! The daughter, hints of her mother's size under the flowery dress, forgetting until it was too late to rein in her laughter. The son-in-law, the only one who tried to respond to Grandmama's monologue: "The grass is yellow because the snow has just melted, Mama. No, I won't speak to the caretaker, Mama." The two boys, full of questions, too young to know about being quiet in places like libraries and cemeteries. The baby was the only one who saw Tom. She was crying today.

Grandpapa was five rows away from El. Even with the wind blowing the right way, Tom couldn't hear any words in the family's shouting. Only when they were passing by on the cinder path could he hear anything but noise.

He said goodbye to El. The shouting family made him nervous. One day the baby would point to him, gurgle something, and the rest would notice him. There was no reason to stay and chance being seen. It didn't look like Mr. Parnes would be visiting his wife, and he had already told El everything that had happened since yesterday.

The bus stop was on the other side of the cemetery, by the Grosvenor Street entrance. He wound his way through the headstones, half of them the new kind: small, flat markers set in the ground, level with the surrounding grass. If he didn't

look down, the new sections of the cemetery looked like any other park.

The only time he used the cemetery's wide cinder path was to cross the drainage ditch. He waited next to the trunk of the willow tree, watching through the screen of drooping branches until no one was around, and then crossed over the ditch.

Tom sat in his usual seat on the bus, the cramped one right after the rear exit door. Two teenage boys were sitting behind him. They were talking about Michael Jordan, and vaguely menacing things like "hang time."

Two stops before his apartment, a woman in a business suit got on the bus carrying a briefcase and four plastic bags full of groceries, tottering as she made her way down the crowded aisle. She reached Tom's seat and proceeded to sit on him. He cleared his throat as her navy wool bottom descended towards his lap. She jumped away, the briefcase slipping out from under her arm, and stared at him.

"Excuse me! Sorry! I didn't see you there."

Her cheeks were turning red, hiding her freckles. She bent down, hooked her briefcase with a baby finger, and moved towards the back of the bus. Tom heard her collapse into a seat with a weary sigh and crinkling plastic bags.

The teenage boys were snickering about her "total gormness."

*** WHEN TO REPLACE THE BATTERY**
~ The battery can be recharged numerous times.

Tom deleted his last sentence.

~ It is possible for the battery to be recharged many times.

He added another "many" to "many

times," and then got rid of the whole sentence.

~ The battery may be recharged many, many, many, many, many times. Hoorah.

The whole pitiful page went to the Lost World of Dinosaurs and Deleted Documents. His recent bout of writer's obstruction was the most stubborn yet. Talking to El about it might help. After all, she had invented the phrase. He tried to remember how she had put it.

A technical writer is technically a writer. All writers get writer's block. Therefore, technical writers get it, technically speaking. However, writer's block isn't technical enough. It should be writer's containment or writer's obstruction.

He turned off the computer and left his cubicle, feeling a bit guilty about leaving at four-thirty. He had never left early before.

His section's cubicles were arranged in an ingenious labyrinth that made travelling to any spot except the coffee machine, as difficult as possible. The trip to the stairwell was especially convoluted; the only destination more arduous was the Section Chief's office.

A good half of his co-workers were in their cubicles, and not at the coffee machine.

"Could you tell her Peter Collins from..."

"...berries and bananas, not too green, okay..."

"What? What? What!"

"...the SP series..."

"...all right then, I'll send you those ASAP."

Tom found the stairs to be quite an unpleasant experience, particularly since the Section had been moved

from the eleventh floor to the eighteenth. The steps, walls, and landings were all unfinished concrete. The only color was the bright, greasy orange of the railings. One of these days he would be afflicted with concrete blindness or railing mania.

Still, he wasn't tempted by the elevators. They were on the other side of the floor, past Translation. The first week back to work after the accident, Tom had heard what El's co-workers thought of him. A real cold fish. Hasn't shed a tear for poor Elspeth. Creepy robot eyes, you know what I'm saying?

The bus was half empty. Tom sat behind two girls with matching permed blonde hair.

"All the Pop Tarts too. A new box."

"The whole box?"

"Like, he's such a pig."

"How do you live with him? Is he still shaving his back in the hallway? That's sooo gross."

The girls soon tired of talking about the exploits of the hungry, hairy man. They were more excited about Sean and his friend Lester, both of whom were svelte and smooth.

The cemetery was empty, at least as far as visitors went, except for Mr. Parnes. Tom said hello to El, barely able to contain his excitement about Mr. Parnes. The old man was standing in front of his wife's towering, eye-catching stone, hands clasped behind his back, concealing his pipe from her disapproving gaze. Strands of his feathery white hair stood almost straight in the wind. Tom wasn't surprised to see him. Monday was his regular visiting day.

Mr. Parnes was speaking out loud to his wife, as had been his habit for the

five years Tom had been coming to the cemetery. He watched the old man's pallid hands fiddle with the black pipe, and listened to the wind. He didn't know if the wind would bring Mr. Parnes' words today. A rather whimsical, frustrating creature in its communication. The only constant he could discern was that the words came once a year, at the beginning of spring.

The wind faded and the white hair floated down. He used the opportunity to retrieve the notebook from his satchel. Writing the words down verbatim would ensure there would be no errors. The beige cardboard cover of the notebook was unwrinkled and only the first page had been used.

Written in her hand, Maggie. (April 18, 1992)

A stone's throw away. (April 23, 1993)

Crikey, she'll know the day. (May 4, 1994)

Kept dancing, even after the band was gone. (April 12, 1995)

Tom waited for the wind.

The sun was setting, turning the marble headstones molten, when a sudden gust brought Mr. Parnes' words.

"Spring has come again, dear."

He copied them down, put away the notebook, and told El about his writer's obstruction. Fifteen minutes before the cemetery closed, he went over to the willow tree by the drainage ditch.

Mr. Parnes and the handful of other evening visitors didn't notice him. A grey squirrel saw him, scooting up an elm tree across from the willow when he squatted down to tighten a shoelace.

Tom practiced the words. He would speak exactly as he had heard: intonation, tone, pace, and with the same matter-of-factness that was in Mr. Parnes' deep voice.

When the gates were chained and the taillights of the tiny old caretaker's huge old Cadillac had disappeared, he ran back to El. He used the cinder path, not seeing the point of navigating the headstones when, technically speaking, he was alone. The moon had turned even the most weatherworn stones into the purest white marble. He ran fast. Even as a child, he had never felt this quick. He glided through the cemetery, and slid feet first into El's marker.

"Safe!" he said.

She had adored baseball. All sports where you had to wear some form of head protection were her passion. Tom had always found the justification for these sports impenetrable. Now, he thought he had glimpsed into their attraction. They moved you.

The wind cooled the sweat on his forehead, but no more words came, only the susurrant of new leaves. Tom got onto his knees, surprised at not having to wait to catch his breath. He had become a regular jock. He practiced the words once more under his breath, and then said them out loud.

"Written in her hand, Maggie. A stone's throw away. Crikey, she'll know the day. Kept dancing, even after the band was gone. Spring has come again, dear."

He waited. The cemetery was quiet. The strictest library in the world could never match it. He stayed kneeling by El until the sunrise changed the marble

stones back into a host of oranges and reds.

His knees had frozen solid, and burned with pain when he tried to stand. He crawled over to the headstone on the left of El—DONALD HOY MCPHERSON, 1894 TO 1988, FIRST OVER THE TOP, LAST UNDER—and used it to pull himself up to his feet. The sound of the caretaker's Cadillac, shocking to his night hearing, jolted him into attempting a step.

The caretaker had been in his small cottage for almost an hour before Tom made it through the Grosvenor Street entrance with his stiff-legged march. He imagined he looked like a newborn zombie to any who saw him emerge from between the wrought-iron gates.

The bus was empty. Having never stayed up all night, he assumed he would drop off in seconds, perhaps even missing his stop. But sleep did not come. He listened to the bus: windows rattling, the hiss of brakes, click clacking turn signals, the driver's thin half-whistle.

*** ON SAFETY**

~ Do not place heavy objects on the unit.

~ To remove the power adapter, pull on the plug. Do not engage in a tug of war with the unit. It is sedentary, although strenuous games of Scrabble are recommended.

Tom deleted everything after "plug," waited five whole minutes, and left his cubicle at a quarter to four.

"It's the SP-202. No, that was the previous model."

"...hijacked a train. They're calling it a tiejack."

"...game tonight. Let's talk to Pete..."

"What? Yeah ... so I said, yadda, yadda, yadda."

He was between the tenth and ninth floors, when he saw Frank from Marketing panting up the stairs.

"Tom Cashouwn! You almost gave me a heart attack, knock on wood." Frank rapped the side of his head. "Didn't see you there. You trying to drop a few pounds, too?"

"I have been exercising lately..."

"Good, good. You're looking lean and mean, Tommy boy." He did a few jabs. "Tip top fighting fit."

"Thanks. I guess I should be going."

"Whoa, Tommy boy!"

"Yes?"

"When did you start losing the old carrot top?"

"I don't know, it's been awhile..."

"Bummer. Thank God I've still got all of mine, knock on wood. Don't be a stranger. I didn't even know you still worked here. Catch you later, brother."

The bus was crowded, but he decided to listen to the Walkman he had been carrying in his satchel for the last couple of months. He had heard Mr. Parnes yesterday, and now he didn't feel like listening to any more words.

The batteries were weak. It was the first time he had used the birthday present El had given him five years ago. A rock and roll station was the only clear signal. The announcer talked a lot, but there wasn't much to hear.

Tom didn't see anybody in the cemetery, so he took the cinder path, anxious to see the result of the words he had spoken last night. He ran, feeling almost weightless, like gravity had only a baby finger hooked around him. El used to tease him about his inexhaustible patience. How he would make a

good tree because he could stand still for so long. A tree with one red fruit on top. He wouldn't be a good tree today. The cemetery had become his gymnasium. The grey squirrel was scared up its tree again when he crossed the drainage ditch. He made it to El without seeing anybody, not even the tiny caretaker.

Nothing had happened.

He said hello to El and told her about his day, keeping the bewilderment and crushing disappointment out of his voice. When he got to the part about meeting Frank from Marketing, he said he hoped she liked bald heads as much as redheads. He talked about his recent athleticism, but his mind strayed to last night's words. Had the wind lied?

Fifteen minutes before closing time, he went to the willow, the wind's words going round and round his mind. After the caretaker left, he went back to El and spoke the words to her all night, until they ceased to mean anything and he wasn't certain he was even speaking them out loud.

In the morning, while he was doing knee bends, he decided that he had made some kind of error. Perhaps the wind didn't speak in straight lines. Why would a force of nature care about chronology?

*** TROUBLESHOOTING**

~ Problem

You hear an erratic humming or a rapid series of beeps.

~ Cause/Solution

R2D2 is upset with you. WD40 or scratching behind his occipital sensor is recommended.

~ Problem

Written in her hand, Maggie. A stone's

throw away. Crikey, she'll know the day. Kept dancing, even after the band was gone. Spring has come again, dear.

Tom leaned back and stared at the hideous fluorescent lights over his cubicle. He closed his eyes, and remembered the five days the wind had brought Mr. Parnes' words. Some of the words had been clear, brought by a strong blustery wind, some had been faint, barely a sigh in the breeze. He was sucked up into the words, spinning with the wind's voice.

beep.

He was dropped back into his ergonomic and impressively uncomfortable chair. He expected to see an irritable R2D2, but it was only his decidedly uncute computer beeping its timed backup. He felt refreshed, almost peppy. It must have been one of those power naps he always heard his co-workers talking about.

He knew what he had done wrong. The words had been right. His delivery had been off.

~ Cause/Solution

The wind definitely speaks in a funnel.

Tom wore the Walkman on the bus again. He had forgotten to borrow one of El's tapes, so he had to listen to the rock and roll station again. The announcer was very excited about broadcasting a No Norman No concert. From the violent lyrics, Tom inferred that the band was named after Norman Bates, and certainly not the much lighter, spiritually speaking, Norm from *Cheers*.

The tiny caretaker was near the grey squirrel's tree, raking moldy leaves left over from last autumn.

"Good evening!" said Tom. He

must be full of pep to have actually greeted someone.

The caretaker jerked in surprise, flinging a few leaves onto a square, russet headstone. "Evening. Jumpin', you gave me a bit of a fright there."

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry."

"Ah, don't think twice about it. I must be getting hard of hearing." The caretaker brushed off the headstone. "Beautiful day, isn't it?"

Tom looked at the sky. The clouds were puffy and white. Sheep clouds. "Yes, it is. The sunset should be a masterpiece."

"Truer words."

Tom continued on, amazed at the huge pile of leaves the tiny caretaker had amassed. He said hello to El and went through his day, mostly talking about how no one had said anything about him leaving work at three o'clock. He mentioned that he was now an ardent rock music fan, and had in fact listened to a No Norman No concert.

Fifteen minutes before the cemetery closed, he went to the willow. The sunset was not quite a masterpiece. The clouds had changed from sheep to angry rhinos and hippos.

He dashed along the cinder path again, certain he was swifter tonight. He said hello again, kneeled down, and used his necktie to dab at a drop of sweat in his eye. He spoke Mr. Parnes' words in a funnel, starting with the clearest of the five phrases the wind had brought, and ending with the faintest.

He waited by her, standing up and walking in circles when his knees threatened to freeze up. A little after midnight, a fierce downpour sent him

to the willow. The raindrops were hard and gelid, almost sleet. He told El he was sorry, but he didn't want to get pneumonia from winter's devious last breath. It would be cosmically silly to catch his death now.

The rain lasted all night, cold and steady after the first deluge. The drainage ditch became a riverlet. He listened to it talk to itself, and wished he could understand the words.

After a barely noticeable dawn, the caretaker splashed by on the cinder path, wearing a yellow raincoat, a sou'wester hat, and carrying a hoe over one shoulder. He looked like he was hunting something, perhaps the elusive white cemetery whale. Tom imagined the look on the caretaker's face if a man in a wrinkled, muddy suit strolled through the willow's dripping screen of branches and said good morning. He patted the tree, assuring it that he would do no such thing. The bark was much the same texture as his unshaven face. The old fellow would probably have a fatal heart attack. He was horrified at the thought of causing the caretaker to become a caretaker.

He listened to the surging riverlet complain about its cramped quarters until the caretaker was out of sight. He ran for the Grosvenor Street entrance, his satchel making a rather slim umbrella.

All the seats in the bus were taken. He had to stand between two freshly scrubbed and shaven businessman holding expertly folded newspapers. Tom looked at his watch, surprised it was already rush hour. He rubbed the prickly stubble on his neck and listened to the Walkman, praying the station wouldn't have a No Norman No encore.

The forecast called for rain.

He was late for work for the first time. No one said anything.

~ Problem

The little rectangular light on your computer screen won't stop blinking. After gaping at this cursed cursor thing for longer than you think, you become light-headed.

~ Cause/Solution

You have not slept, except for a power nap, or eaten, for three days, nincompoop.

Sleep. Eat. Do not consume WD40.

Tom left work after everybody in his Section had traipsed by his cubicle on their way to the cafeteria for lunch.

"...his C food diet. Chocolate, chips, cookies."

"The new assistant project manager..."

"...believe this rain?"

"...big fire in the elementary..."

"...that referee should be..."

"My mouse is acting like a rat..."

He was between the second and first floors when he remembered he hadn't turned off his computer.

"Highly unprofessional, Tommy boy," he said to the SMOKING IS PROHIBITED IN THIS AREA sign.

The bus driver looked at him in a peculiar way. He assumed it was due to his unshaven, unkempt appearance. The radio played the music of a band called the Plastic Daisy Fornicators. A vast improvement over the Norman Bates people, despite the perplexing name. How does one fornicate with a plastic flower? Or a real one?

The rain had emptied the cemetery of visitors, so Tom tried to run along the cinder path, but it was too boggy, and he only managed a trot. The satchel

was still not much of an umbrella. His suit was getting quite itchy.

Nothing had happened.

Tom almost screamed at the wind. Was it playing some sort of capricious game with him?

He calmed himself enough to say hello to El, and speak Mr. Parnes' words in a funnel. After he had repeated them for a few hours, he told her he was going to wait out the rain under the willow.

The riverlet was definitely not pleased with its narrow and unbecoming drainage ditch. He watched the cemetery through the willow's sagging branches, and hoped the grey squirrel had found a nice dry place.

It rained all night.

The caretaker was using a rake to hunt for the white cemetery whale the next morning. Tom rubbed the coarse beard on his neck, and wished he had a sou'wester.

The rain stopped during the bus ride. His suit started to dry. He came to the conclusion that he had never really experienced true itchiness before. The radio announcer filled the air waves with hot air.

He arrived at work at ten to eleven.

~ **Problem**

You cannot store into or retrieve from memory.

~ **Cause/Solution**

I can't remember. By the way, have you ever heard of the Plastic Daisy Fornicators. They sing about Batman having power envy since he's only human and not a super duper creature. That's why he's gone batty. Bats in his pointy belfry. Paranoid screechophrenic. Too inadequate for the job. Can you please tell me the solution?

The cause?

Everybody in his section was in a rush to get to the cafeteria for pizza day.

"Everything but green peppers."

"...been getting a lot of rain lately..."

"Thank God it's..."

"...hear about that big strike..."

"What? Parsnips!"

The bus was empty except for a girl slouched at the very back. Tom wasn't certain which had more studs, her face or her black leather jacket. He sat down in his usual seat, and scratched his beard. At least his suit wasn't itchy any more.

"Are you okay, sir?" called the bus driver.

"Fine, thanks. I guess I've had one too many all nighters."

The driver laughed. "Too old for those sort of hijinks myself."

The girl stomped off the bus at the next stop. Tom was the sole passenger all the way to the cemetery. The bus driver turned out to be quite a talker. His name was Phil, and he had never heard of the Plastic Daisy Fornicators, but he did know about Superman and Batman. He thought Superman was boring because he was too powerful.

The cinder path wasn't a path any more, except perhaps for water fowl. He leapt the smaller puddles and ran around the great lakes.

Nothing had happened.

He stared at El's stone. The day was windless, but he couldn't stop himself this time. "Tell me what I'm doing wrong, you ... you blowhard!"

He said hello to El, a bit embarrassed about his outburst, and told her about Phil. He said he must be a sight

in his filthy suit and scruffy beard. The people around him were lucky it had rained so much. He would smell quite ripe otherwise.

The caretaker walked by a few hours later, a bulging garbage bag the same size as he was slung over one shoulder.

"Afternoon," said the caretaker.

"Hello."

"Looks like rain again tonight."

Tom looked up at the sky. "Are you certain?"

"Oh yeah, going to be a dilly of a storm. Sounds hokey, but after all these years working outside, I can smell it."

"This may seem like a strange question, but I was just wondering who you preferred, Batman or Superman?"

"Batman, no doubt about it, and I wouldn't nearly call it a strange question. Not here. People have asked me some doozies."

"Why Batman?"

"Ah, well, it's because Superman's made of steel and can fly better'n a bird."

"You think he's too powerful?"

"No, it's not that. He's qualified for his job, all right. It's just that he's never known what it's like to be stuck in traffic or bang your knee on the corner of a table."

Once he got going, the caretaker, Meese, talked up a storm of his own. Phil, the bus driver, would love him. Tom suspected the caretaker's job didn't give him a lot of opportunity for conversation, except with the caretakers, who were good listeners, but their repartée wasn't particularly snappy. Even the wind was better.

They mostly talked about *Moby Dick*, "a crackerjack read," according

to Meese. Tom confessed to only getting through the first fifty pages.

Fifteen minutes before closing time, he went to the willow, frightening off the grey squirrel again. Could squirrels have fatal heart attacks? The riverlet was lower and getting sleepy.

Meese's storm came while Tom was still under the willow. A few raindrops tapped cold fingers on his bald spot, finding their way under his shirt collar and down his back. The tapping turned into slapping, then pounding, and suddenly the riverlet was awake. It was indeed a dilly of a storm.

He watched the tumult through the willow's lashing branches, and decided he had again been making an error with Mr. Parnes' words. He had been speaking them in a funnel, but with Mr. Parnes' matter-of-fact voice. The wind was a force of nature. It certainly wasn't matter-of-fact.

He left the willow's meagre shelter, anxious to try his new idea. He slogged along the cinder path, surprised he could navigate in the pitch dark of the storm without breaking an ankle in a puddle. Perhaps he had become a real batman, and used sonar.

He ran and leapt around El's marker, moving in closer to her after every circle. He didn't try to remember the pace and intonation of Mr. Parnes' words. He screamed them, matching the storm's chaos, until the burning in his lungs had spread to his whole body.

The Cadillac woke Tom up. He was under the willow tree, and there was only blue sky between the branches. His head was so heavy, he imagined roots had sprouted from it, intertwining with the willow's. The riverlet was complaining about its ditch again. The

grey squirrel was busily munching away on something as it watched him.

He had slept all night in a cemetery. The thought wasn't at all disturbing. His slumber had been deep; he had, in fact, been dead to the world. He closed his eyes, a few more minutes of sleep, a power nap, then he would go check on El. Wind ruffled his hair, bringing one word to him. Sleep.

A careless mix of laughter, shouting and crying woke him up again. The shouting family was crossing the drainage ditch, splashing along the cinder path on their way to visit Grandpapa.

At first, Tom thought he had only been asleep for fifteen or so minutes. The morning sky was the same blue. The grey squirrel was watching him, although from a little closer. The riverlet was still complaining. But his watch told him he had slept another day and night in the cemetery. He was a regular Rip Van Winkle, with the itchy beard to prove it. Or should he have said, R.I.P. Van Winkle?

He decided not to risk being seen by the shouting family. It was Sunday; he could check on El this afternoon. He shuddered at the commotion that would ensue if the baby caught a glimpse of him in this Van Winkle state. He started to brush at his suit, saw that it was quite hopeless. He scratched his beard. His neck felt like it was teeming with ants. The shouting family would think him a madman.

Phil wasn't on duty. The bus driver gave Tom a long look, and kept glancing back at him in the rearview mirror. He listened to the Walkman and scratched his beard. He wanted to tell the driver his appearance was the fault of the dwarves and their cursed bowl-

ing game, but he assumed such a statement would only get him tossed off the bus.

Immediately after arriving at his apartment, he collapsed on the bed, resuming his Rip Van Winkle impersonation, not even bothering to take off his beleaguered suit. He slept straight through until half past nine Monday morning. When he realized what day it was, he was quite upset that he would have to wait until after work to check on El. At least he would be able to get rid of the itchy beard. He was thinking about what a colossal relief it would be to finally shave when he remembered he had a ten o'clock meeting with the Section Chief. The purpose of which was, undoubtedly, to fire him for his recent spate of irregular hours.

He struggled out of the suit and into his other one, wondering how Superman managed this kind of feat with such expedience. He rushed out the door, stuffing a tie in one coat pocket and the Walkman in another.

*** RECYCLING SEALED LEAD BATTERIES**

~ Sealed lead batteries are recyclable.

Tom deleted the last sentence. Work had been going quite well all morning. He had finally got over his writer's obstruction, and he didn't want to break for lunch on such an insipid note.

He still couldn't believe he had been named Employee of the Month. The Section Chief had cited Tom's "pretty near fanatical thoroughness" as the reason for the "EOTM designation." His supervisor had even approved of his new "intellectual-looking" beard.

"...did you do on the weekend?"

"Wasn't that an incredible storm

Friday night? The wind..."

"She'll transfer next month to..."

"...the cemetery that was vandalized during the big storm?"

"...Mondays."

He spun his chair and catapulted out of the cubicle into the midst of his co-workers. He slipped through their yelps of surprise and ran to the stairs, hurdling potted plants and dodging photocopiers.

"What!"

"Gee, who was that?"

"...out of me!"

"...new assistant project manager?"

Tom went down the stairs swifter than any elevator, taking the steps three, four, five at a time.

Frank was leaning on the railing of the third floor landing, gasping for breath.

"Whoa, Tommy Boy!" Frank stepped in front of him, blocking his way. "Where's the fire?"

"I'm late for an important meeting."

"You'd better slow down, rocket man. It's not good business to show up at a meeting with a broken neck. Dead guys don't make such a hot first impressions."

"That's quite true, but haven't you ever wanted to fly like Batman?"

"Hate to tell you this, brother, but Batman can't fly."

"Oh, I don't know if that's quite true, Frankie boy."

Tom leapt down the entire flight of stairs, hitting the next landing with a boom that echoed through the stairwell.

"What the hell! Are you on drugs or what, Cashouwn?"

He went down the rest of the stairs one landing at a time. Frank was still

yelling when he reached the ground floor, but Tom couldn't hear what he was saying over the echoes.

Phil was on duty. He had heard about Friday's cemetery vandalism on the news, and thought it had to have been drunken teenagers.

"Knocked over a bunch of grave-stones, and you know what else the punks did? They dug up a grave, if you can believe that. Probably daring each other to look in the coffin. Nothing but a bunch of punks, out getting their thrills during a big storm."

"Have the police arrested anybody?" He knew the answer, but still couldn't refrain from asking. Perhaps the Section Chief had accurately described his thoroughness.

"Nope. Not yet. But it's only a matter of time before the cops get them. Stupid punks like that never cover their tracks. Yup, it's only a matter of time."

Unless there were no tracks to begin with. Tom scratched his beard and smiled out the bus window. It was another pristine spring day.

Phil asked if he remembered the Jewish graves that were desecrated by neo-Nazis a couple years back. Tom said he recalled reading about it in the newspaper. They agreed that the dead were a lot nicer than the living.

He ran along the cinder path, surprised he could go so fast with only rain water to sustain him for days. Meese was working on the drainage ditch about twenty meters downstream from the willow, shovelling a mound of new earth onto a crumbled portion. The caretaker didn't notice him dash by. He felt bad for Meese. The old fellow would be upset about the "vandalism" of his cemetery.

Tom sprinted the last bend all out, slipping out of gravity's hold, his feet barely touching the path. He swept down the path towards El.

Nothing had happened.

Her stone was still neatly set in the yellow and green spring grass. He wanted to strangle the wind with his bare hands.

"Come here, liar! I know how to hurt you today."

Something flapped, sounding like a flag in a strong breeze. Tom whirled, hands ready to grab and choke. He was stunned by what he saw.

Starting five rows from El, most of the headstones had been knocked over in a vague pattern of concentric circles. An enormous and haphazard game of dominoes. At the centre of the innermost circle was a ragged hole bordered by yellow tape, POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS, fluttering and snapping in the wind. He wove through the toppled stones, ducked under the tape, and stumbled over the piles and sprays of dirt around the hole, knowing what he would find.

The hole was empty. It was where Mrs. Parnes had been. Her towering stone was on its side. EDITH MARGARET PARNES, BELOVED WIFE OF WILLIAM JAMES. The rest was buried under mud.

The wind hadn't lied. He had made yet another error. Mr. Parnes' words couldn't been used for El. The wind speaks in funnels, but not bridges.

He swayed, dizzy with the knowledge of his colossal error. The hole was reaching for him and he was on his knees, spinning towards it. The earth's words came to him, promising to cover him and give the gift of nothing. He closed his eyes and said yes to the

earth, stretching his arms wide to embrace its gift, and his hand caught on something. He opened his eyes to see what had grabbed him. POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS. He untangled his hand and turned back to the earth. But his eyes were open and he saw it.

The bottom of the hole was sludge and brown water, a World War I battlefield, and the grey squirrel was floating in one of the trenches, curled and shrunken, grey no more. He scrabbled away from the edge, knocking lumps of mud into the hole, the sucking splashing sound bringing bile to his throat.

"I'm sorry!"

Tom ran. He tried to hurdle a low headstone, but his foot caught on it and he fell, nearly cracking his head on the next stone. He stared at the black-flecked marble that had almost fractured his skull. He couldn't muster the energy to stand, so he crawled through the rows. The hanging branches of the willow grazed his back as he went under them. He lay down at the edge of the drainage ditch. The riverlet had stopped complaining about its cramped quarters. It was disappearing under the warm sun. He could hardly hear it.

"I'm sorry, El. I wasn't thinking straight. That's not right. I was thinking too straight."

He begged her forgiveness, trying to hear an answer in the water's sound. Something occurred to him as he watched the riverlet. Did water speak in a straight line? It always flowed one way.

"Please give me your words. The wind can't help. It speaks in funnels."

He listened, straining for the water's

voice, but there was no Mr. Parnes to help him, and he heard only the appalling trickle of his own failure.

"Tom? Is that you? Are you all right?"

He looked up. Meese was on the other side of the ditch, holding a red wheelbarrow.

"Ah," said the caretaker, his tiny face softening, "sorry for disturbing you. I heard someone over here and thought I'd better investigate, what with the vandalism and all. Actually, I thought you might be Mr. Parnes. I wanted to apologize to him for what those blasted devils did. Well, I'll be leaving you to your privacy."

"You won't be seeing him again," said Tom.

"Pardon me? Seeing who?"

"Mr. Parnes. He won't be visiting here ever again."

Meese set the wheelbarrow down.

"Why do you say that, Tom?"

"His wife isn't here."

"How do you know that? Only the police have that information. The public weren't to know that there was a damn body snatching, too."

"It's a long story, not as long as *Moby Dick*, but still epic."

"Well, I was on my way to cook up some lunch, and I'd welcome company. I'd like to hear your story. And you look like you could use a hot meal."

Tom looked down at the riverlet and thought he understood. Meese was speaking the water's words. Not the right ones for El, but they were the only words he would ever hear from the water. The riverlet would be gone in a few hours.

El was gone. She had been for five

years. She was never coming back. She was...

Dead.

Water, wind, earth, none were going to bring her back. Perhaps they were powerless to do so. Or they didn't take notice of anything but the expression of their own force. Perhaps Mr. Parnes' words hadn't even come from the wind. Wasn't it absurd to think that the riverlet had anything to do with the words the caretaker had just spoken?

He didn't look up from the water as he answered Meese. "I'd like to take you up on your invitation. I am quite peckish."

"Good to hear it. I'll make my world-famous toad-in-the-hole."

"But you won't believe my story. You're going to think it's another whopping fish story."

Had he indeed become a madman? Was the peculiar havoc left in the cemetery the result of vandalism?

"Oh, I don't know about that. Look where I've been working for the last thirty years. I could tell you stories, true ones, that'd make you shake your head so much your brains'd turn to milk."

"I'm a good listener." Tom raised his head. "By the way, I'm sorry about all that mess back there. I'd like to help you clean it up."

"Well, that's a mighty generous offer, and—jumpin'!"

He had tried to get up, but only managed to slide his head and chest over the edge of the bank.

"Don't budge an inch! You'll take a tumble into the ditch for sure if you do."

"That's okay. We're old friends."

Puzzlement mixed with the worry on the caretaker's face.

"I'm coming over there. Be there in a jiff."

After Meese had hurried away towards the cinder path, he looked back down at the riverlet.

"Thank you for the words. So many, and all in a straight line."

Just in case forces of nature weren't oblivious to the world of Batman and

other mad creatures. Perhaps some day he would hear words brought by the wind again.

He listened to the drowsy murmur of the riverlet while he waited for Meese, and wished he had the strength to scratch his beard. It was becoming quite unbearably itchy. He couldn't wait to shave. 🍁

AUTHOR: JOHN GRAHAM was on the verge of beginning a career as a lawyer when he saw the light of Reason and gave it up. He spent two years in Japan recovering from the trauma of his close shave with the legal profession, and returned with his brain bubbling over with ideas for stories; eg. *Godzilla vs. Relic* (the one from *The Beachcombers*). He is really a terribly interesting person, but suspects your time would be better spent in reading speculative fiction, especially stories with dinosaurs and/or flying cars. He lives in Ottawa, a stone's throw from Parliament Hill (assuming you have the strength of ten men and an exceptionally aerodynamic stone).

ARTIST: JAMES BEVERIDGE dwells in suburban Edmonton actively seeking the truth within the conundrum that is creativity, through activities both manual and silicon-based. Considered by some to be the poster boy for the Aesthetically Dyslexic, he is currently exanding his website with unsolicited visions from R. Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series. Visit his website for more insights into his mind: <http://www.darkcore.com/~sage>.

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